

Myanmar's New Generation

A study of elite young people in Yangon,

2010 to 2016

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University

November 2017

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own original work.

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8 November 2017

Word count: 94,313.

To the memory of Saw Fortune.

I hope I have conveyed the hope you felt in this moment in Myanmar's history, when
you thought your country was almost ready to accept your scrappy, tattooed, and
beautiful self. While you did not live to see a day when you felt at home in your country,
you worked every day so that others might.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my generous Myanmar friends. You all tolerated me watching you a little too closely and asking questions that were sometimes a little too prying. I will never be able to thank you fully for allowing me into your lives. Special mentions go to Chester, Wai Yan, Jason, Arkar, and April: you all make Yangon feel like home.

The Australian National University has been my academic home for over a decade now, guiding me since my undergraduate degree. While at times it felt like I was completing this PhD in cold shadows thrown from ivory towers, I could always rely on the shelter of academic collegiality from some incredible academics in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs. I could not have completed this project without those academics or my scholarship from the Australian Government.

Dr. Nicholas Farrelly, from our first trip along the Myanmar-Thailand border in 2008, you have enlivened my curiosity and encouraged me to pursue my interests. Coming along on whirlwind tours of Yangon's nightclubs and *Thingyan* stages you have always gone well beyond your duties as chair, committed to understanding the world I was researching. Whatever the future holds, I will be forever indebted to you for your support and encouragement.

Prof. Andrew Walker, you have supported and calmly guided me through more crises than I can count. I am eternally grateful that you generously continued to advise me and review my work from Malaysia.

Dr. Nicholas Cheesman, the academic rigor and attention to detail you brought to my panel is without parallel. Thank you for helping me to refine my thinking and clarify my contribution to knowledge.

Dr Chit Win, I was a terrible office partner but you were a wonderful PhD companion. Your ability to pursue research and learning with sincerity and playfulness is inspirational. David Mathieson, spirited discussions and your commitment to me finishing this “thing” place you in a special category of people, I am fortunate to call you a friend. Justine Chambers, Alice Dawkins, David Gilbert, Gerard McCarthy, and Kristina Simion, I have enjoyed years of your friendship and academic collegiality.

Simon Speldewinde, you have read all my drafts, attended all my presentations, and been an enduringly wonderful friend. Supatra Basham, Jenny Goodman, and Katie Hodges, my Yangon family, you were the perfect friends in the field, reliable for both wine times and medical emergencies. Tasfia Khan, Chloe Mandryk, and Nick Rigby, my best of friends, you are excellent humans. To the Hazan family – Debbie, Georges, David, Daniel and Yves – you have been endlessly generous with me, many thanks.

Michael Hazan, words cannot suffice, I cannot wait to embrace life after PhD with you.

My incredible family – Mum, Dad, Nic, Andre, Sam, Archie, and Atticus – you are my world and here’s to celebrations out from behind a mound of papers and books!

Finally, to you, the reader. If you are reading this, it means I made it... and that you have read at least three pages of my thesis. Sincerely, thank you. I have written this with many voices in mind, yours not least of all. I hope you enjoy the pages to come.

While I am indebted to many, the usual caveat applies and any errors or omissions in this work are solely mine.

Abstract

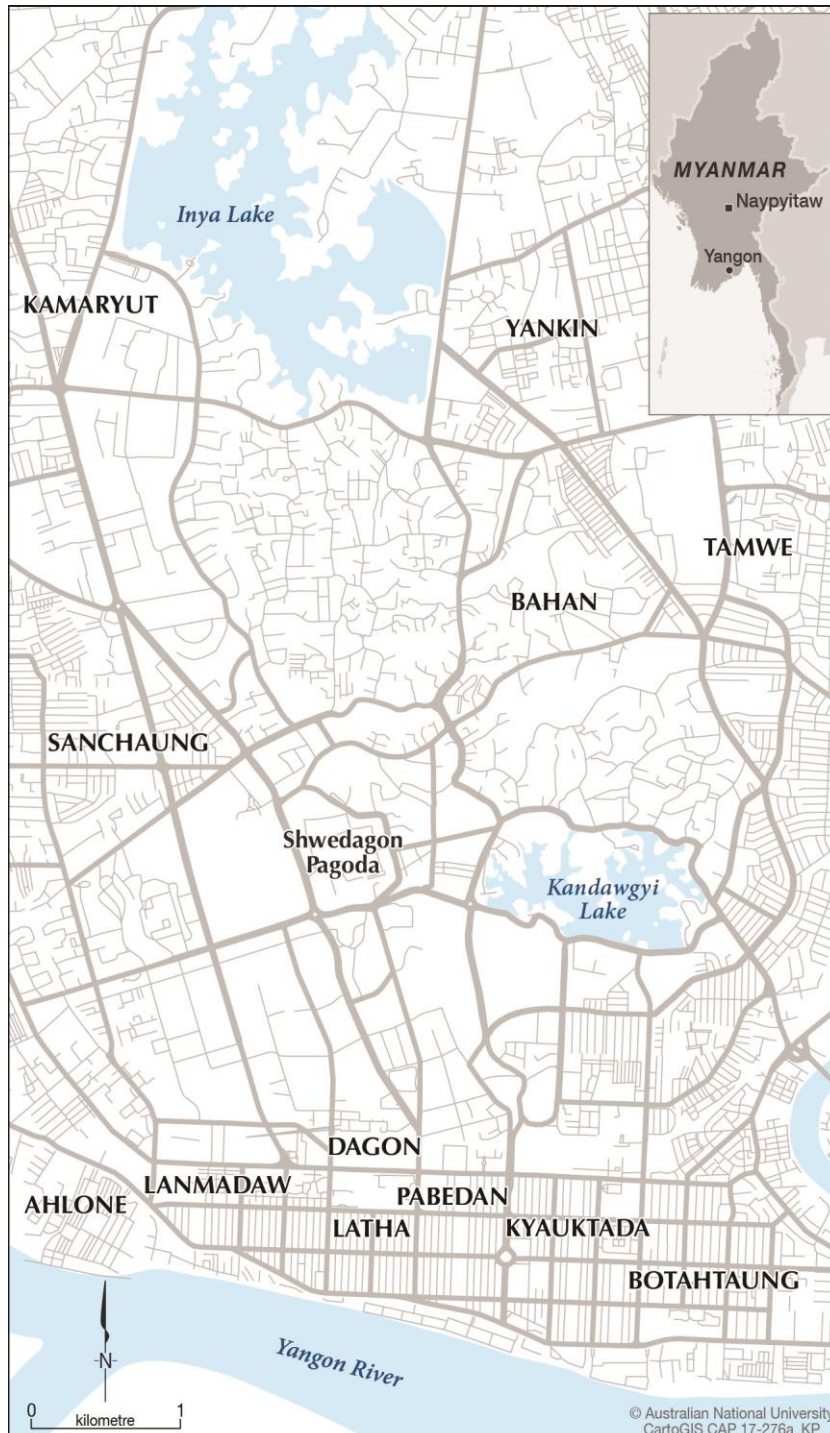
With Myanmar's 2010 general election the world's longest reigning military regime undertook a managed diminution of overt authoritarian rule. As the population adjusted to a series of cascading social transformations, elite young people stepped up to catalyse a period of generational change. This thesis considers elite young people in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016, and provides analysis based on extensive fieldwork in the city of Yangon, Myanmar. This thesis disaggregates five social groups of elite young people in contemporary Myanmar, and orders them according to their proximity to established arrangements of the former military regime: the Yakuza gangsters, the cronies, the beloved young women, the cool underground rappers, and the creatives.

Through a process of generational rejuvenation elite young people influenced Myanmar's social and economic transformations, in what proved to be nuanced and contradictory ways. Theories of generations conceptualise generational change as an iterative process, involving the regeneration and rejuvenation of existing explanations and systems alongside the introduction of entirely new ones. In contrast, theories of elite formation explain how various elite qualities are inherited from one generation to the next, often bolstering the social status of the people with that quality. This thesis applies a combination of these approaches to the case study of Myanmar, contributing a vibrant understanding of the processes of generational change, highlighting the role of elite young people in the early days of a wide-ranging social transformation.

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Map 1. Central Yangon

Introduction

After 2010, serene elite spaces emerged in Myanmar's bustling urban centre of Yangon: in the trendy bars teeming with designer dogs and handbags, in the tranquil grounds of the opulent homes of Golden Valley, and in the soundproofed recording studios downtown. The calm of these places was a different kind of serenity to that of the rickshaw driver snoozing in the shade outside – it was detached and new. From 2010 to 2016, a new generation of young people started making sense of their lives as their country was transformed.¹ The impetus for Myanmar's transformation was not the revolution many people had expected and hoped for: there was no mass uprising and no violent overthrow of military power. It was a top-down political transition that was directed and dictated by the military leaders, and eventually, if unenthusiastically, endorsed by the main opposition political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by democratic icon and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Aung San Suu Kyi.² Many aspects of this transformation have been scrutinised – scholarship on Myanmar was revitalised during this period with an explosion of interest and unprecedented

¹ Myanmar is used to refer to the country and its people since 1989, when the name was officially changed from the Socialist Republic of Burma to the Union of Myanmar. In 2008, the name was changed to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Burmese is used to refer to the language. For more on nomenclature see Robert Taylor, "Finding the Political in Myanmar, a.k.a. Burma," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2008): 220.

² Following the 2010 election, a new National Legislature formed and fastidiously followed procedures to legislate widespread change. In 2015, the transformation reached a milestone, with the sweeping electoral victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the NLD, and the appointment of the first civilian President since 1962. See Ardeth Thawngmung, "The Myanmar Elections 2015: Why the National League for Democracy Won a Landslide Victory," *Critical Asian Studies* 48 (2016).

access.³ Under these conditions, this thesis suggests that elites are intrinsically important and interesting, and that the role of elite young people in social, political, economic, cultural and generational change merits particular attention.

This thesis focuses on and disaggregates elite young people in a period of generational change, to make sense of elite composition and practice from 2010 to 2016. It argues that Myanmar underwent a process of generational change, led by the country's elite young people.⁴ These elite young people were not representative of the majority of Myanmar people, or even the majority of young people. However, analysing elite young people reveals valuable insights into the moral, political, and economic values that emerged during this period of transformation. Their elite status was conferred through various forms of capital, including legacy, military, economic, cultural, and social capital.⁵ As elites, these young people had access to international trends, translating them into new consumption habits and advocating for new morals and values. Concentrated in Yangon, the country's entrepot and the site of rolling cultural change, they presented shifting notions of what being a young person in Myanmar could mean. They promoted the liberalisation of attitudes and morals, and they showcased competing identities and lifestyles.⁶

³ Andrew Selth, *Burma (Myanmar) Since the 1988 Uprising: A Select Bibliography* (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2015).

⁴ Andrew Selth, "Burma After Forty Years: Still Unlike Any Land You Know," *Griffith Review* (2016), 4, https://griffithreview.com/wp-content/uploads/Selth.Burma_.Essay_.Final_.set_.pdf.

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, (Oxon: Routledge Classics, 2010).

⁶ In 2016 Myanmar's transformation was cited as a possible lesson in how Asian nations could peacefully resolve internal problems, "who knows, maybe it could be applied one day to North Korea," see Joel R. Campbell, "Asian International Relations in a New Era of Instability," *Review of International Law and Politics* 12 (2016), 39. Since 2016, however, this kind of optimistic perspective has been disputed as the military has committed mass atrocities against the country's Rohingya population in Northern Rakhine State. Nick Cheesman, "Introduction: Interpreting Communal Violence in Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017).

This thesis makes an original contribution to theory by bringing together generational and elite approaches to social and economic change through the case of Myanmar.

Taking a social generational approach, it argues that young people are agents in the process of change.⁷ Diverging from the approach that tends to study young people as a cohort,⁸ the focus is placed on elite young people who demonstrated their unique role in leading generational change capitalising on their elite status. These elite young people are categorised into five social groups, creating a typology of the elite new generation in Myanmar during this period. The ways that these five social groups contributed to generational change reveals a tension between existing social systems and elite values, alongside more revolutionary and foreign influences.

The research question is: what was the role of elite young people in mediating social and economic change into elite composition and practice in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016?

By combining elite and generational approaches, this thesis advances understandings of the complex processes present in such moments of rapid social change. Chapter 1 positions the thesis' original contribution to theory through the integration of generational and elite approaches to social and economic change through the case of Myanmar. The next five Chapters explore five social groups of elite young people in Myanmar. The five social groups are organised on a continuum from the least revolutionary in Chapter 2 to the most consciously and confrontationally 'new' in Chapter 6. The five social groups are the Yakuza, who were the sons of the old elite (Chapter 2), the cronies, who were the children of Myanmar's business leaders (Chapter 3), the *chit thus*, who were the young women (Chapter 4), the *mite deh* guys, who were the

⁷ Andy Furlong, Dan Woodman, and Johanna Wyn, "Changing Times, Changing Perspectives: Reconciling 'Transition' and 'Cultural' Perspectives on Youth and Young Adulthood," *Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 4 (2011).

⁸ Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*, (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1991); William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, (New York: Vintage, 2000).

underground rappers (Chapter 5), and the creatives, who were the creative outliers (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 analyses Myanmar's water festival, *Thingyan*, as a spectacle of the new generation, where all five social groups interacted with one another and the wider Myanmar population.

From 2010 to 2016, elite young people worked through a challenging moment of Myanmar's history and championed various elite values. Each of the five social groups sought to establish their particular elite values as preeminent, and therefore entrench their status in Myanmar society. Unravelling these social groups and their elite values contributes to the elite studies literature and theories of generational change by exposing how certain elite qualities and values become dominant, and the influence that elite young people command in moments of social flux and generational change.

From 2010 to 2016, Myanmar underwent an exceptional period of transformation. During this period, many Myanmar people were hopeful that their lives and country were, finally, on the cusp of widespread and meaningful improvement. Much of the hope stemmed from the ending of protracted military rule.⁹ In 2010, the military accelerated their long planned transition to democracy by staging a quasi-democratic election.¹⁰ Absent the NLD, the election was won by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), a political party heavy with retired military men and headed by retired military general, Thein Sein.¹¹ From 2010 to 2016, President Thein Sein and his government defied scepticism about the sincerity of the transition and passed a range of new laws.¹² Under the USDP government, the country enjoyed

⁹ Robert Taylor, "Myanmar in 2012: *mhyaw ta lin lin* or Great Expectations," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2013).

¹⁰ Jurgen Haacke, "The Myanmar Imbroglio and ASEAN: Heading Towards the 2010 Elections," *International Affairs* 86, no. 1 (2010); Robert Taylor, "Myanmar: From Army Rule to Constitutional Rule?" *Asian Affairs* 43 (2012).

¹¹ Sean Turnell, "Myanmar in 2011: Confounding Expectations," *Asian Survey* 52, no. 1 (2012).

¹² Lee Jones, "Explaining Myanmar's Regime Transition: the Periphery is Central," *Democratization* 21, no. 5 (2014); Min Zin and Brian Joseph, "The Democrat's Opportunity," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012);

improvements in labour standards, economic policies, foreign investment, education, press freedom, and Internet access.¹³

In the 2015 Myanmar general election, the Myanmar people voted in a landslide victory for a new civilian government headed by Aung San Suu Kyi.¹⁴ While it is difficult to quantify the population's enthusiasm in the lead up to the 2015 election, it is possible to infer from the 2015 election result popular support for change but a lack of support for the USDP. The NLD's electoral win, and, just as importantly, the military's acceptance of the election result saw the realisation of the population's hopes and dreams for a new civilian government.¹⁵ After the NLD took control of the government in 2016, the population's unrestrained expectations of how the electoral victory would lead to manifest improvements in their lives were disappointed.¹⁶ Decades of economic stagnation and mismanagement at the hands of military rulers preoccupied with national security and personal gains are likely to take decades to reverse.

Myanmar youth studies

In this atmosphere of hope and excitement, young people were presented with new cultures, opportunities, and forms of expression as the country emerged from over half a century as a pariah state. Some academics, notably Jane Ferguson, Heather MacLachlan, Ward Keeler, and Chie Ikeya, have conducted research on aspects of Myanmar culture that touch on young people.¹⁷ Their studies offer insights into pop

Nicholas Farrelly and Chit Win, "Myanmar's Turbulent Transformation," *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016).

¹³ Mary Callahan, "The General's Loosen their Grip," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012).

¹⁴ Ardeth Thawngmung, "The Myanmar Elections 2015: Why the National League for Democracy Won a Landslide Victory," *Critical Asian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2016).

¹⁵ Hunter Marston, "Myanmar's Electoral System: Reviewing the 2010 and 2012 Elections and Looking Ahead to the 2015 General Elections," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 21, no.3 (2013).

¹⁶ Stephen McCarthy, "Myanmar in 2016: Change and Slow Progress," *Asian Survey* 57, no. 1 (2017).

¹⁷ Jane Ferguson, "Burmese Super Trouper: How Burmese Poets and Musicians Turn Global Popular Music into *Copy Thachin*," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 14 (2013); Heather MacLachlan, *Burma's*

music in Yangon, popular culture in the border regions, Myanmar hip-hop, and the social status of women. Their contributions are starting points, suggestive as they are of certain common features that effect young people in Myanmar: creating and adapting new cultures, and struggling with inherited structures of inequality. With this foundation, it is possible to sketch an overarching picture of the ways elite young people created multiple new identities, adapted specific cultures, and enacted diverse expressions of social change.¹⁸

Popular music is one of the most well researched aspects of young people's lives in Myanmar. Jane Ferguson and Heather MacLachlan contribute comprehensive explorations of Myanmar pop music and popular music subcultures. MacLachlan assesses pop music in Yangon, finding that "Burmese pop music cannot be dismissed as just another instance of cultural imperialism" and that the media's tendency to do so is a result of the considerable difference between the worldviews of Burmese artists and "that of liberal elites in the West."¹⁹ Ferguson explores the music, media, and film industries of Shan ethnic groups along the Thailand-Myanmar border.²⁰ Her research raises the profile of ethnic cultural studies, finding, for example, that "copy songs" and pop sounds belie complex cultural negotiation and brokerage systems at work in the Shan region.²¹ Young people are not the focus of MacLachlan and Ferguson's studies.

Pop Music Industry: Creators, Distributors, Censors (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2011); Ward Keeler, "What's Burmese about Burmese Rap? Why Some Expressive Forms Go Global," *American Ethnologist* 36 (2009); Chie Ikeya, "The 'Traditional' High Status of Women in Burma: A Historical Reconsideration," *Journal of Burma Studies* 10 (2005/2006).

¹⁸ Mary Bucholtz, "Youth and Cultural Practice," *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2002).

¹⁹ MacLachlan, *Burma's Pop Music Industry: Creators, Distributors, Censors*, 4.

²⁰ Jane Ferguson, "Sublime Rock: Burmese Popular Music, Language Code Switching and Sentimentalism among Shan Migrants at the Thai-Burma Border," *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 11 (2012); Jane Ferguson, "From Contested Histories to Ethnic Tourism: Cinematic Representations of Shans and Shanland on the Burmese Silver Screen," in *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention*, eds. David Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto (London: Routledge, 2012).

²¹ Jane Ferguson, "I Was Cool When My Country Wasn't: 'Mao' and 'Deng' Making Transnational Music in the Golden Triangle," *Asian Music* 47 (2016).

Rather, their research touches on young people as the artists and audience for the cultures they are focused on.²² MacLachlan and Ferguson offer insights into the importance of music in young people's lives and identities, and they detail some of the complex processes involved behind cultural expressions.

Hip-hop in Myanmar is a relatively new addition to popular music culture and the subject of less comprehensive study than pop music. In 2009, Ward Keeler wrote an article that analyses contemporary Burmese hip-hop on its musical merits, rather than reducing it to an outlet for political dissatisfaction and youthful rebellion.²³ Keeler asks "What is Burmese about Burmese Rap?" and seeks to establish the antecedents of contemporary hip-hop music in Myanmar with "an indigenous call-and-response genre" that existed before the fall of the last Bamar²⁴ dynasty in 1885.²⁵ But his quest for antecedents is unsuccessful, and his study concludes that there is nothing unique about Burmese hip-hop, which he dismisses as a facsimile reproduction of Western hip-hop

²² MacLachlan also wrote an article on the flow of Myanmar music to the United States to service the Myanmar diaspora largely, see Heather MacLachlan, "The Transnational Flow of Music from Burma to the United States," *Journal of Burma Studies* 20 (2016).

²³ Some media accounts of popular music in Myanmar, including the rise of punk music and hip-hop, have focused on them as an outlet for young people's political dissatisfaction. These articles tend to overlook the musical merits and cultural value of popular music and culture beyond their political dimensions. See for example, Olaf Schuelke, "The Punks of Myanmar: A Look at the Colorful (and Political) Members of an Emerging Counterculture," *The Diplomat*, May 12, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/05/the-punks-of-myanmar/>; *Yangon Calling – Punk in Myanmar*, directed by Alexander Dluzak and Carsten Piefke, released 12 July 2013 (Germany and Myanmar, 2014), DVD; Htein Lin, "Rocking Rangoon," *Index on Censorship* 39, no. 3 (2010); Ron Gluckman, "Music: Rock Around Rangoon," *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 1995.

²⁴ The Bamar are the dominant ethnic group of central Myanmar. Ethnicity is a highly contested and politically fraught minefield, with the Bamar representing the dominant ethnic group, whose culture, including the Burmese language and Buddhist religion, have been most represented by the government. Other ethnicities in the borderlands have been in civil war, though many have long standing ceasefire agreements, with the central government since independence. The matter becomes more complicated when the lineage of a person shows multiple ethnicities, yet official purposes (such as the 2015 census) only allowed people to identify as one. Given Bamar ethnicity is the least problematic and most privileged in Yangon, many identify as Bamar despite complex genealogies. In this dissertation, the focus on urban elites in Yangon means the majority of the research subjects are 'Bamar' – if they are otherwise it will be signposted. Myanmar's ethnicities are well researched, for some seminal examples see Michael Gravers, *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007); Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1999); Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: State of Conflict* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2008); Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁵ Keeler, "What's Burmese about Burmese Rap?" 2.

music's shallow cosmopolitan values. The question his article raises, but does not answer, is what young people think about contemporary hip-hop culture and how they engage with international systems through music culture. Keeler indicates ways that Myanmar culture may develop in dialogue with existing foreign systems, and this thesis further explores those interactions, particularly in the Chapter 5 analysis of how hip-hop rose to popularity in Myanmar after 2010.²⁶

The influence of foreign systems on Myanmar society is also present in Chie Ikeya's studies of young women in Myanmar. Ikeya argues that colonial era legacies and historical depictions of Myanmar women have incorrectly positioned women as empowered and high-status.²⁷ In a 2005 article, Ikeya shows how the cultural stereotype of the autonomy of Burmese women was created for nationalist and colonial discourses, and perpetuated by post-colonial scholars.²⁸ She finds that, in part, the initial framing of the high status of Burmese women stemmed from British notions of cosmopolitan women and what freedom, independence, and equality with men looked like for women, rather than a close reading of Burmese women in Burmese practices and hierarchies. Ikeya indicates how gender relations in Myanmar have been misunderstood, in ways that have obscured Myanmar's strict gender hierarchy, which privileges men and oppresses women. Ikeya invites further ethnographic consideration of young women in

²⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2010).

²⁷ For example, see the depiction in Mya Sein, "The Women of Burma: A Tradition of Hard Work and Independence" *The Atlantic* (February 1958), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1958/02/the-women-of-burma/306822/>.

²⁸ Ikeya, "The 'Traditional' High Status of Women in Burma" for more studies of women in Myanmar see: Jessica Harriden, *The Authority of Influence: Women and Power in Burmese History* (Copenhagen: NIIAS Press, 2012); Nilanjana Sengupta, *The Female Voice of Myanmar: Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Tamara Ho, *Romancing Human Rights: Gender, Intimacy, and Power Between Burma and the West* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015); Tharaphi Than, *Women in Modern Burma* (London: Routledge, 2014); Chie Ikeya, *Reconfiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

Myanmar to overcome the cultural stereotypes she describes – something focussed on in Chapter 4 on elite young women.

Existing Myanmar cultural studies by MacLachlan, Ferguson, Keeler, and Ikeya analyse the complex processes of cultural expression, the mediation of foreign systems into the local, and the influence of historical grievances and inequalities in Myanmar. By researching Myanmar's elite young people, it is possible to infer the role of elite young people in those processes of social transformation, which sheds new light on the consideration of specific cultural expressions, including pop music, popular culture, hip-hop, and gender relations. Where MacLachlan, Ferguson, Keeler, and Ikeya conducted their research focused on particular subcultures and social phenomena, this thesis researches with a focus on elite young people.

Young people and generational change

As global flows of people and information have increased, so has the movement of cultures and styles across borders. These global flows of culture have been studied in Myanmar, including MacLachlan's study of pop music and Keeler's assessment of hip-hop. The movement of cultures and styles across borders represents one of the most critical changes that elite young Myanmar people grappled with during this period. This experience reflects international patterns where, as cultural actors, young people engage with global flows and interpret them into local cultures. In response to the emerging relationship between globalisation and young people, in the early 2000's some anthropologists developed what they called the social generational approach, which is adopted in this thesis. The social generational approach guides researchers to consider young people as cultural agents, rather than adolescence as a life stage.

Writing of youth studies more generally, Mary Bucholtz argues that this youth studies transition accompanied a broader shift in interdisciplinary focus: from a “restrictive notion of culture” that concentrated on visible youth cultures, to a concern with “the practices through which culture is produced.”²⁹ Ikeya’s study of women in Myanmar is suggestive in this respect: warning of the pitfalls of accepting a cultural artefact at face value, and highlighting the need to consider the practices that resulted in that artefact.³⁰ Since the 2000’s, youth studies academics – such as Steven Miles, Sarah Riley, Yvette Morey, Christine Griffin, and Adrienne Evans – have developed the social generational approach, arguing that young people are active in the changing social order worldwide.³¹ In the changing social order, urban centres are considered the primary sites of youth dynamism and social change.³² A social generational approach assists an analysis of Yangon as one of these urban centres.

The social generational approach has exploratory powers when applied to the Myanmar case study, highlighting the influence of gradual social change rather than the revolutionary politics of past decades.³³ The earlier youth studies approach focused on young people as political forces for anarchy working towards the overthrow of capitalism.³⁴ The image of the student protester, although well established in Myanmar, is less relevant to the 2010 transformation than it was in earlier decades in Myanmar.³⁵

²⁹ Bucholtz, “Youth and Cultural Practice,” 526.

³⁰ Ikeya, “The ‘Traditional’ High Status of Women in Burma.”

³¹ Steven Miles, *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000); Sarah Riley, Yvette Morey, and Christine Griffin, “The ‘Pleasure Citizen’: Analyzing Partying as a Form of Social and Political Participation,” *YOUNG: Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 18, no. 1 (2010); Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley, *Technologies of Sexiness: Sex, Identity, and Consumer Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³² Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi-ite South Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

³³ Anita Harris, Johanna Wyn, and Salem Younes, “Beyond Apathetic of Activist Youth: ‘Ordinary’ Young People and Contemporary Forms of Participation,” *YOUNG: Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 18, no. 1 (2010).

³⁴ Philip G. Altbach, “Perspectives on Student Political Activism,” *Comparative Education* 25, no. 1 (1989).

³⁵ Young people have a long history of political engagement in Myanmar, from student protesters who led a failed countrywide popular uprising in 1988 to the elite young people forming a new generation and

Student politics and protests did not play a defining role in the 2010 transformation, and the meaning of political action for young people moved on from this revolutionary paradigm.³⁶ From 2010 to 2016 the opportunities for young people to play an active role in transforming Myanmar were indicative of a new politics – where young people contributed to more gradual social and cultural change in keeping with the state’s trajectory – ending the era when the only available course of action for young people was protest and revolution. Youth studies academics who take a social generation approach argue that young people play influential new roles when they capitalise on opportunities to actively transform their society, outside of formal political processes.³⁷ Considering the transition in Myanmar according to this approach reveals that the actions of its elite young people are consistent with shifting patterns of political action by young people globally, away from formal political engagement.

An underlying premise of the new youth studies approach is that young people have been rendered increasingly isolated from formal political processes. Isolated from these processes, they redirect their political impulses into their consumption habits and lifestyles.³⁸ Through their consumption and lifestyles, young people engage in symbolic cultural consumption, which is not necessarily tied to money, and thereby erodes class

participating in the gradual social transformation of Myanmar society. For more on Myanmar’s political student history culminating in the 1988 student riots, see Burma Watcher, “Burma in 1988: There Came a Whirlwind,” *Asian Survey* 29 (1988); James F. Guyot, “Burma in 1988: ‘Perestroika’ with a Military Face,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1989); Kurt Shock, “People Power and Political Opportunities: Social Movement Mobilization and Outcomes in the Philippines and Burma,” *Social Problems* 46 (1999); Joseph Silverstein, “Burmese Student Politics in a Changing Society,” *Daedalus* 97 (1968).

³⁶ Jacqueline Menager, “Youth and the Vote,” *New Mandala*, October 27, 2015, <http://www.newmandala.org/youth-and-the-vote/>; For more on the development of protest behavior in Myanmar since 2010 see Andy Buschmann, “Does the data reveal declining dictatorship in Myanmar?” *New Mandala*, February 27, 2017, <http://www.newmandala.org/data-reveal-declining-dictatorship-myanmar/>.

³⁷ In addition to studies by Steven Miles, Sarah Riley, Yvette Morey, Christine Griffin, and Adrienne Evans, see also Paul Gilchrist and Neil Ravenscroft, “Space Hijacking and the Anarcho-politics of Leisure,” *Leisure Studies* 32 (2013).

³⁸ Miles, *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World*.

boundaries.³⁹ In the 1980s Pierre Bourdieu advanced theories of cultural capital as explaining the influence of seemingly intangible privilege, associated with social status but not necessarily synonymous with wealth or class.⁴⁰

Recent youth studies consider how young people earn, keep, lose, or alter their social status through their consumption patterns, cultural capital and other non-financial forms of capital. Steven Miles argues that new youth lifestyles have outgrown “structural” or “cultural” approaches to the study of youth.⁴¹ Miles states that he is motivated by the inadequacy of the existing sociology of youth to explain how young people “call upon their lifestyles as a common resource, a breathing space within which they can actively, and at times creatively, cope with the constant uncertainties apparently characteristic of life in a so-called ‘post-modern’ world.”⁴² He argues that young people are not excluded from society as “risk-taking trouble makers,” but that their lifestyles are actually the expression and reproduction of society’s dominant values.⁴³ Young people’s purchasing styles and consumption patterns are indicative of them carving out autonomy.⁴⁴ Miles shows that the lives of young people reflect the changing nature of social life in general, for better or worse, towards conspicuous consumption and capitalism.⁴⁵ This thesis similarly reads wider meaning into the ways elite young people use their lifestyles to express their confidence going into a moment of social change and their embrace of increased individual freedoms.

³⁹ *Working Class Youth Culture*, eds. Geoff Mungham and Geoff Pearson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

⁴⁰ This thesis engages concepts of cultural capital, influenced by Bourdieu’s theories of taste and distinction, see Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

⁴¹ Miles, *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World*.

⁴² *ibid*, ix.

⁴³ *ibid*, 1.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 110; William Osgerby, *Youth in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 35.

⁴⁵ Steven Miles, “Young People, Consumer Citizenship and Protest: The Problem with Romanticizing the Relationships to Social Change,” *YOUNG: Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 23 (2015).

Elite young people's consumption habits have particularities that are different from the consumption habits of non-elite young people. Elite young people are generally able to afford a variety of imported luxury goods that may be out of reach for other young people. As well as inheriting the financial capital to afford luxury goods, elite young people may also inherit certain distinct tastes from their parents and grandparents.⁴⁶ While certain inheritances may influence consumption patterns of elite young people, they are also influenced by social and cultural capital. Miles argues that young people are involved in a process of identity-making through consumerism that is not solely dictated by economic access and inherited tastes.⁴⁷

In addition to engaging in a process of identity-making, young people can also deploy their consumerism to shape dominant discourses, such as politics and gender. Sarah Riley, Yvette Morey, and Christine Griffin's study of young people in the southwest of England in 2010 shows how young people can engage politics in non-traditional ways to redefine political behaviour.⁴⁸ Riley, Morey, and Griffin argue that young people in that moment in England constituted a new generation, whose political goals were self-determination and sovereignty. This new generation expressed their political goals through leisure and partying, rather than traditional political engagement, such as protest or campaigning.⁴⁹ By doing so, young people redefined the boundaries of what was political action and expression.⁵⁰

In addition to redefining political boundaries, young people can redefine gender boundaries. A study by Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley analyses how young Western

⁴⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

⁴⁷ Miles, *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World*.

⁴⁸ Riley, Morey, and Griffin, "The 'pleasure citizen.'"

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 35.

women engage with competing and conflicting discourses of sexual subjectivity and the contemporary female identity. They argue that twenty-first-century Western women express themselves as active sexual subjects by negotiating what is considered “sexy, sassy, and confident.”⁵¹ Their navigation of sex, identity, and pleasure can reproduce or challenge existing power dynamics.⁵² In Myanmar, while some young women began to express themselves as active sexual subjects, the majority remained beholden to existing gender roles. The continued structural disadvantage of young women indicates the potentially uneven nature of generational change.

The process of generational change in Myanmar included greater access to alternative lifestyles, an influx of tourists, a burgeoning expatriate community, and a growing middle-class.⁵³ The increased economic activity resulted in greater consumer choice in almost all facets of life. Prior to 2010, consumerism had been constrained by scarce domestic availability, limited by sanctions, access, and poor infrastructure. After 2010, elite young people were inundated with global styles and cultures and engaged in a process of identity-making through consumerism. Myanmar’s new generation of elite young people worked to reintegrate Myanmar into the global world, forging a new politics based on independence and self-sovereignty.⁵⁴

Changing landscapes

The new generation was proposing new ways to live in transforming Myanmar and how to re-engage with a dynamic, globalised world after decades of isolation. Their actions

⁵¹ Evans and Riley, *Technologies of Sexiness*.

⁵² Phillip Hammock, *Foreword* (2014) in *Technologies of Sexiness: Sex, Identity, and Consumer Culture*, eds Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), vii.

⁵³ Edward Parker, “Myanmar’s Opening: Doing Business in Asia’s Final Frontier,” *The Diplomat*, November 18, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/myanmars-opening-doing-business-in-asias-final-frontier/>.

⁵⁴ Mike Ives, “A Land Eager to Look Rich: Luxury Brands Edge Into Myanmar,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/fashion/luxury-in-myanmar-a-long-term-investment.html>.

signalled that something very different was happening in Myanmar, and that old explanations were increasingly inadequate. Elite young people embodied a new set of emerging elite qualities that were stoked and sped by the democratic transition underway in Myanmar. This moment of sweeping political, social, cultural, and economic changes also wrought radical shifts in the way Yangon was used. Creating new spaces was one way that elite young people mediated social and economic changes, and changed elite practice in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016. Members of the new generation, including repatriating elite young people, participated in the imagining and creation of those spaces. The changing urban environment reflected the changing generational mindset, and the rising value of independence, foreign styles, and conspicuous consumption in Yangon.

The changing generational mindset in Myanmar was the result of the emergence of new elite qualities and the end of others, signalled in some important and symbolic moments that occurred in 2011 and 2012. In November 2011, Phyo Tay Za, the son of one of the country's notoriously corrupt businessmen won an appeal to overturn sanctions that had been extended to him by the European Court of Justice for his father's underhanded business dealings.⁵⁵ His win indicated that the children of corrupt businessmen were unhindered by their parents' past indiscretions and free to legitimise their parents' operations.⁵⁶ In September 2012, the American Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, announced an end to American import sanctions on Myanmar products.⁵⁷ The

⁵⁵ *Pye Phyo Tay Za v Council of the European Union*, C376-10 P, ECLI:EU:C:2012:138 (March 13, 2012).

⁵⁶ One of Phyo Tay Za's barristers, Sir Sydney Kentridge QC, said in a press release following the judgement "[t]he Court has raised the question of putting pressure on the father through the son. I said that this was a very unattractive if not inhuman proposition. To visit the sins of the father on the son is not consistent with the jurisprudence of the EU," (Carter-Ruck Solicitors) March 13 2012, http://www.carter-ruck.com/Documents//Pye_Phyo_Tay_Za-Press_Release-130312.pdf.

⁵⁷ Office of Foreign Assets Control, "Publication of Burma General Licenses and Burma Designations," *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, November 16, 2012, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20121116.aspx>. For an assessment of the effect of US

end of import sanctions represented the possibility that a new generation of designers and producers may one day repatriate their overseas production back to Myanmar, once reliable shipping routes and infrastructure materialised. In August 2012, the USDP-led government disbanded the Press Scrutiny Board, which had previously censored all publications. The end of official scrutiny presented an opportunity for local artists to express themselves freely through official channels.⁵⁸ There was no precise moment when Myanmar transformed. Instead, generational change and social transformation was a process that occurred gradually through complex interactions at the behest of a multitude of actors.

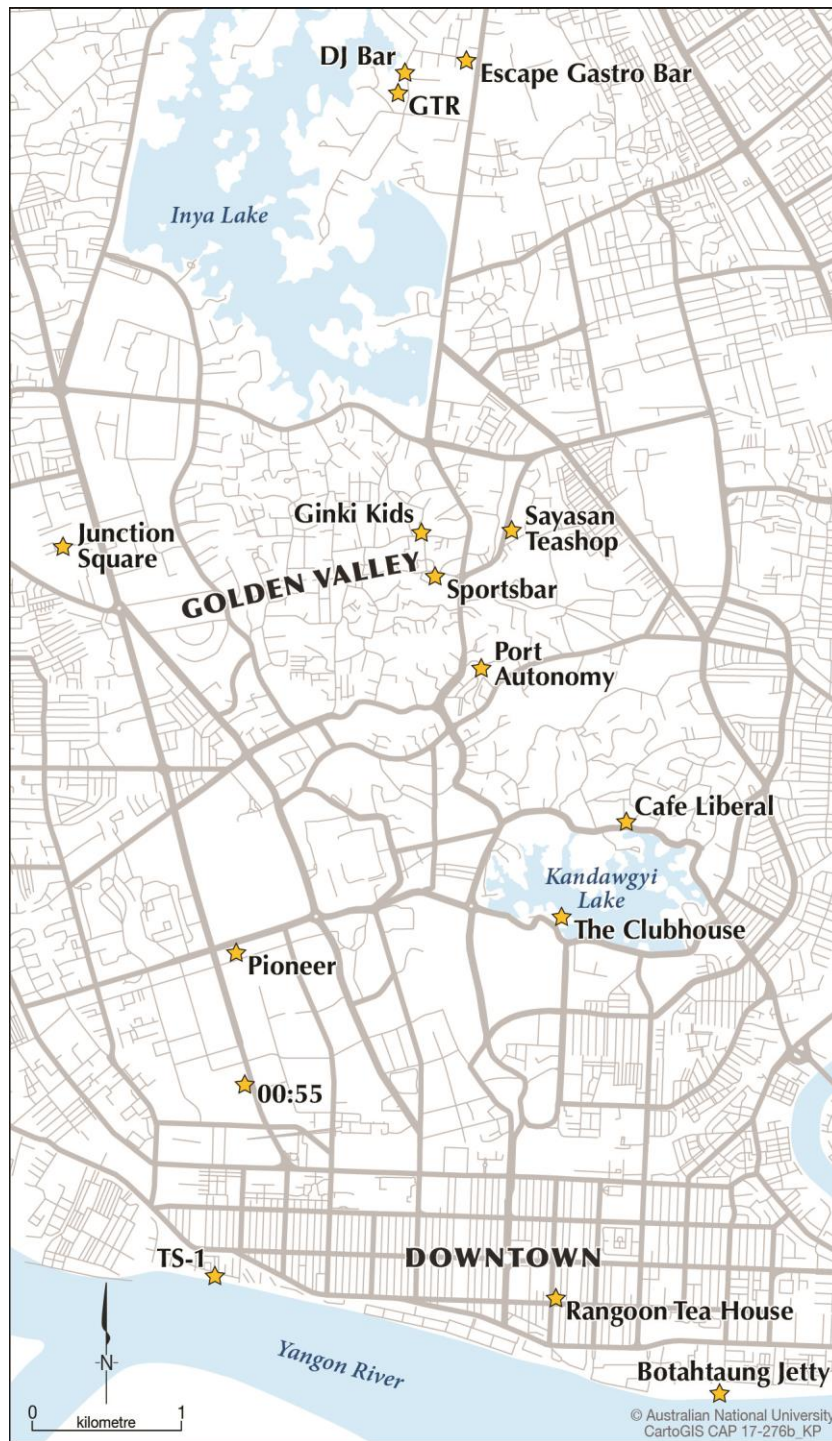
The moment of Myanmar history described here included the creation of a world that broke with so much tradition, including practical infrastructure and consumptive changes. Changes included a massive increase in the number of cars and volume of traffic, inflated property prices pushing many residents out of the city limits thereby increasing the number of public buses careering along the roads, new buildings under construction, and the demolition or rehabilitation of old buildings. Physical changes to the city were accompanied by changes to the ways that young people were socialising, including a shift from teashops and homes to malls and bars. After 2010, the new generation began changing the physical landscape of Yangon to reflect their changing social reality. Before 2010, the key site of socialising and surreptitious gossip was the teashop. After 2010, the new generation moved away from teashops and towards new

sanctions see Toshihiro Kudo, "The Impact of U.S. Sanctions on the Myanmar Garment Industry," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (2008).

⁵⁸ Thomas Fuller, "Chief Censor in Myanmar Caps His Red Pen," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/22/world/asia/myanmars-chief-censor-is-closing-his-office.html>.

mall, cafes, and bars that were popping up across the city, such as Junction Square mall (see Map 2).⁵⁹

⁵⁹ There are many ethnographic observations of teashop culture available, including: Stephen Osmond, "Pagodas and Paradox: Guarded Mystery of Myanmar," *The World & I* 15.2 (Feb 2000); Keiko Tosa, "The Chicken and the Scorpion: Rumor, Counternarratives, and the Political Uses of Buddhism," in *Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Monique Skidmore (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).



Map 2. Central Yangon with new generation landmarks

In addition to young people's departure from teashops, increasing traffic began to encroach on many teashops. Before 2011, prohibitively expensive car import licenses had kept the number of cars in the country relatively stable, as only a select number of wealthy people could afford to import new cars. Yangon's roads had been relatively quiet and disused by cars, allowing teashops and fruit stands to sprawl onto the streets. The sprawl was curtailed in September 2011, when the government overhauled the car import regulations to make new cars more affordable.⁶⁰ An explosion in the number of cars resulted in increasing the traffic on the streets, which pushed teashops back off the roads. For many teashops, most of their seating had been on the streets and the loss of that space resulted in significantly reduced business and patronage. As with other aspects of existing Myanmar culture, certain ways of using the city were retained and appropriated by the new generation, while others fell away.

While the sprawl of teashops was curtailed after 2011, the cultural contributions of the Myanmar teashop and other historical artefacts remained valuable to some members of the new generation.⁶¹ The Rangoon Tea House was opened in November 2014 by a repatriated Myanmar young man, appropriating the cultural cache of elements of Myanmar history to cater to fellow repatriates, expatriates, and tourists (see Map 2).⁶² The Rangoon Tea House aimed to replicate the atmosphere of the traditional road side Myanmar teashops, which owner Htet Myet Oo said were "so unconventionally cool."⁶³

⁶⁰ Increasing traffic was in part the result of a government overhaul of car import regulations in September 2011. The government removed the previously prohibitively-expensive import licenses and introduced a scheme that allowed the owner of a car, between 20 and 40 years old, to swap the vehicle for a license to import a new car. Anthony Kuhn, "Cars for Clunkers: Myanmar Swaps Old Rides for New," *NPR*, July 27, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/07/29/157477789/cars-for-clunkers-myanmar-swaps-old-rides-for-new>; Aung Hla Tun, "Insight: New Cars for Clunkers: Myanmar on Road to Change," *Reuters*, November 25, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-cars/insight-new-cars-for-clunkers-myanmar-on-road-to-change-idUSTRE7AO04Y20111125>.

⁶¹ Kecia Fong, "Imagining Yangon: Assembling Heritage, National Identity, and Modern Futures," *Historic Environment* 26, no. 3 (2014).

⁶² Rangoon Teahouse's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/RangoonTeaHouse/>.

⁶³ Sasha Gora, "Taking the machismo and MSG out of Myanmar's tea shops," *Vice: Munchies*, March 27, 2015, <https://munchies.vice.com/en/articles/taking-the-machismo-and-msg-out-of-myanmars-tea-shops>.

The Rangoon Tea House served refined versions of traditional Myanmar food such as *mohingya* (fish soup), curry, and tea leaf salad, and boasted a tea menu with sixteen variations of Myanmar tea. Htet Myet Oo said he was responding to a gap in the market for fine Myanmar food and using the restaurant as a way to preserve a heritage building that had been scheduled for demolition.

Colonial buildings and artefacts continued to hold cultural value for members of the new generation.⁶⁴ In 2015, the daughter of Tun Kyi, a former general and Minister for Commerce, caused a minor scandal when she hosted her birthday party in the grounds of Yangon's most historically significant colonial building, the Secretariat, which had been closed to the public for decades.⁶⁵ The Secretariat was also the subject of a substantial rehabilitation and conservation project by the Yangon Heritage Trust, a local NGO headed by Thant Myint U, the recently repatriated grandson of former UN Secretary-General, U Thant.⁶⁶ Elsewhere, members of the new generation opened new ventures in other historic buildings. A new bar in the old Kandawgyi Palace Hotel, the Clubhouse, drew on the famed British Burma's Gentlemen's club, the Pegu Club (see Map 2). The décor of the Clubhouse reflected various Myanmar icons including a Myanmar owl, *ꠤꠞꠦ ꠠꠞꠦ*, as their motif, pictures of the previously resplendent officers' Pegu Club, and a cocktail list inspired by its colonial predecessor.⁶⁷

Some inference from the repatriating new generation members' fondness for the colonial is possible. These repatriated young people had spent the majority of their years

⁶⁴ Felix Girke, "The Yangon Court Buildings: Between Thick and Thin Heritage," *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 30, no. 1 (2015).

⁶⁵ Noe Noe Aung, "Birthday Party at Secretariat Sparks Social Media Firestorm," *The Myanmar Times*, March 24, 2015, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/13700-birthday-party-at-secretariat-sparks-social-media-firestorm.html>.

⁶⁶ Jayde Lin Roberts, "Heritage-Making and Post-coloniality in Yangon, Myanmar," in *Citizens, Civil Society, and Heritage-Making in Asia*, eds. Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, Hui Yew-Foong, and Phillippe Peycam (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2017).

⁶⁷ The Clubhouse website <http://www.clubhouseygn.com>

overseas, learning the history of their country from foreign textbooks. As a pariah state notoriously under researched and opaque to the international community it is possible these young people associate Myanmar's history with its time under colonial rule, rather than under military rule. The other option is that designing businesses harking back to the colonial past was a pragmatic business decision, profiting from expatriates and tourists' penchant for the colonial era. Gentlemen's clubs, for example, had an exotic air and debonair associations that became highly marketable. The Myanmar teashop was another highly marketable business model, providing cautious foreigners and Myanmar repatriates the opportunity to eat "traditional" Myanmar food without the hygiene concerns, language barriers, or dusty humidity of the roadside stalls. Another possible explanation for the trend is that these young people were nationalistic and these were their attempts to foster some connection with a home they did not know or fit into. For example, some repatriating Myanmar young people had only limited Burmese language. The ways that elite young people wrought changes to the urban landscape of Yangon reflected the wider social changes they heralded.

In addition to the influence of the new generation, the government was making its own moves to develop Yangon. In January 2012, a new urban development institute, the Urban Research Development Institute, was established in conjunction with the UN to preserve historic buildings.⁶⁸ A 30-year master plan for the reinvigoration of Yangon was announced, to "reduce chaos and create public spaces for the public to enjoy."⁶⁹ Regulation would harmonise with practical considerations, including required parking

⁶⁸ Htar Htar Khin, "UN, Govt Open Urban Development Institute in Downtown Yangon," *The Myanmar Times*, January 30, 2012, <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/yangon/1229-un-govt-open-urban-development-institute-in-downtown-yangon.html>; Zoe Daniel, "Burma Fears Loss of Built Heritage," *Lateline*, May 7, 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/burma-fears-loss-of-built-heritage/3996764>.

⁶⁹ Hter Hter Khin, "Industry Backs 30-year Yangon Master Plan," *The Myanmar Times*, April 9, 2012, <https://www.mmtimes.com/business/property-news/831-industry-backs-30-year-yangon-master-plan.html>.

spaces and drainage.⁷⁰ The government invited investors from Singapore to build sky rail tracks and local investors to improve the circular train network.

The significance of the political changes that were occurring during this period should not be understated. The Minister of Industry and chairman of Myanmar Investment Commission, Soe Thein, admitted “Yangon’s infrastructure was outdated and not up to the challenge of housing its six to seven million residents.”⁷¹ Beginning to admit such failings and inviting assistance from foreign investors to address the deficiencies was an essential step for the development of Myanmar. The move indicated the government was no longer focusing only on protecting military interests, as the previous did with the building of Naypyidaw and military expenditures. Instead, the government was responding to the growing need to address Yangon’s development challenges.⁷²

The changing landscape of Yangon from 2010 to 2016 reflected the changing social and economic landscape, including a new generation of elite young people who worked to make the city more liveable for themselves. The ways that these young people began to make the city more liveable indicated their penchant for certain aspects of their country’s history and for new spaces, such as malls and bars, which were up to date with foreign trends. Some of the young people developing the urban landscape were repatriated Myanmar people, who brought their foreign sensibilities to bear on local culture, as visible in the Rangoon Tea House. As distinct from the previous landscape of elite people in Yangon, which had developed private elitist enclaves and gated compounds concentrated in the area dubbed “Golden Valley” (see Map 2), the new

⁷⁰ Htar Htar Khin, “Industry Backs 30-year Yangon Master Plan,” *The Myanmar Times*, May 21, 2012, <https://www.mmtimes.com/business/property-news/831-industry-backs-30-year-yangon-master-plan.html>.

⁷¹ Aye Thidar Kyaw, “Yangon City Set for Major Upgrade, says Minister for Industry,” *The Myanmar Times*, December 5, 2011, <https://www.mmtimes.com/business/property-news/1523-yangon-city-set-for-major-upgrade-says-minister-for-industry.html>.

⁷² José A. Gómez-Ibáñez, Derek Bok, and Nguyễn Xuân Thành, *Yangon’s Development Challenges* (Myanmar: Proximity Designs, 2012), 1.

generation developed public spaces spread out around central Yangon reflecting the importance of outward displays of their independence, foreign styles, and conspicuous consumption (see Map 2).

Methodology and positionality

The author had been travelling to Myanmar since 2008 and lived in Yangon for three years of the PhD candidature, which included a period of immersive, qualitative research for first eighteen months from October 2012. For the first few months of this period, time was spent accessing individuals and groups who were active in subcultures that expressed new and foreign practices such as underground hip-hop shows, car races, and bar culture.⁷³ After making some inroads, particularly into the underground hip-hop scene, initial observations suggested that these subcultures were all linked in what appeared to be a collective elite space of youthful expression. Throughout the fieldwork period, some underground rappers and young women were the subject of the most prolonged study, both during the fieldwork period and the subsequent time in Yangon writing up the thesis. Other groups and individuals were the subjects of shorter periods of intensive observation, such as the Yakuza.

This dissertation creates a typology of elite members of the new generation. While it does not create a comprehensive typology of all elite people, and groups of elite young intellectuals, artists, and political activists, for example, are not included, it does more to make sense of elite composition and practice than any other scholar working on Myanmar in the period of the study. This thesis demonstrates how these five social

⁷³ Rowland Atkinson and John Flint, "Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: Snowball research strategies," *Social Research update* 33, no.1 (2001); Kenneth Goldstein, "Getting in the Door: Sampling and Completing Elite Interviews," *Political Science and Politics* 35, no. 4 (2002); Chaim Noy, "Sampling Knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11, no.4 (2008).

groups were the primary actors in creating a new generation and transforming the social and cultural elite space of Yangon. Other young people, who may be influential in elite political or activist communities, but were not members of the same elite Yangon space as these five social groups are not considered.

As the country's most progressive and culturally advanced region, Yangon was the obvious choice as the site for this study. While the whole country has a troubled political history, Yangon has traditionally been the locus for most popular uprisings and political drama. In 2005, the movement of the national capital to Naypyidaw, 370 kilometres to the north, threatened Yangon's prominence. However, speculation that the move would deplete Yangon's economic viability and business community has proven incorrect. The removal of the apparatus of state and the social transformation of Myanmar have contributed to a rejuvenation of Yangon. The population of Yangon remained the most progressive and internationally engaged in Myanmar, providing logistical and cultural leadership for the nation as a whole. As the vanguard of the country's transition into democracy and a capitalist structure, and the location of most outlets of youth culture, it was the ideal location for this study.

This study is limited, focused as it is on elite young people during a relatively brief period of time. In part, this is due to practical limitations that existed when the research was begun. From 2012 to 2014, access to Myanmar required frequent trips to Bangkok to renew expensive visas through often unreliable agents. Student visas, foreign residence permits, and international student processes have since been created, and researchers are now freer to conduct studies in more remote and rural areas of Myanmar. Visa limitations and residence restrictions, which only allowed foreigners to live in certain Yangon townships, influenced the decision to conduct fieldwork in Yangon. The most apparent expansion of this research project would be to consider

generational change and the influence of elite young people in other urban and rural areas of Myanmar.

The research was conducted in a mix of Burmese and English. The author is conversational in Burmese and many elite young Myanmar people speak English. Their assistance was required to translate complicated or nuanced points. Most of the young people researched spoke almost fluent English, and many preferred to speak English. They were more comfortable in English for various reasons, including reducing the likelihood of being overheard by people who may have been critical of their conversations. Usefully, those who were likely to judge elite young people's conversations often did not speak English well enough to understand. If there were any doubt they could, young people would speak complicated English slang quickly to avoid being understood by passers-by or eavesdroppers.

In this thesis, pseudonyms are used when prudent and it errs on the side of caution when deciding whether to use a pseudonym or a real name. The decision has centred on a consideration of the nature of an individual's activities and whether their exposure could potentially compromise or expose them to persecution. An individual's own decision to record something publicly was also considered. For example, if an individual has already been quoted in an interview or on public social media recounting a particular story or behaviour, then their real names may be associated with that activity. This approach is as described and approved in the project's university ethics approval, and consistent with consent received by individuals in the field. In general, real names are used for publicly documented stories, for example, most of Chapter 5 on underground rappers uses real names and the case study on the Tay Za family in Chapter 3. For stories involving less well-known individuals or compromising stories, such as those involving drugs and illegal behaviours, pseudonyms have been used.

Before delving into the thesis outline, a note on access and positionality. Myanmar's elite young people subsumed the author into an existing field of social relations. Different social groups assigned various roles throughout the period of fieldwork.⁷⁴ Certain characteristics impacted on this positionality, including foreignness, age and gender. As a young Australian woman, these characteristics were central to most of the roles assigned. Positions assigned included that of a girlfriend, a young woman with a bad reputation, a foreign journalist, simply a "foreigner," and a researcher.⁷⁵ For many, potential girlfriend or sexual conquest was the most immediately apparent option and was the one adopted by the Yakuza. They had no interest in this research, and they appeared to tolerate continued resistance to their sexual advances because they derived status from having a young foreign woman in their group when they were in bars and nightclubs. Overall, the most durable and common reputation was that of a young foreign woman who spent her time in nightclubs with underground rappers and wealthy young men. This reputation impacted on relationships with young women and their boyfriends.

One incident shows the impact of the author's association with elite young men, the prevalence of surreptitious gossip between different social groups of elite young people in Yangon, and the intransigence of reputational damage for young women. During *Thingyan* water festival in 2014, when the author met a female friend's new boyfriend, he was cold and apprehensive, responding to the introduction by saying "I know all about you." He went on to say that he thought the author was a bad influence on his girlfriend. As this story demonstrates, at first a young Australian female PhD student had been a curiosity and free to move between social groups in Yangon. Over time

⁷⁴ Sudhir Venkatesh, "'Doin' the hustle': Constructing the Ethnographer in the American Ghetto," *Ethnography* 3, no. 1 (2002).

⁷⁵ Lorraine Nencel, "Feeling Gender Speak: Intersubjectivity and Fieldwork Practice with Women Who Prostitute in Lima, Peru," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12, no. 3 (2005), 351.

though, rumours and speculation mounted. The author's reputation remained tarred for years, even after the fieldwork period and frequenting bars and nightclubs with various groups of elite young men had ceased.

The ways that different individuals responded to the author indicated their affiliation with and informed the choice of, their analytical category. For example, the underground rappers, who had spent time overseas, were more likely to have platonic friendships with young women. They also had experience with interviews and journalists. At first, the underground rappers treated the author like a transient foreign journalist, and they were guarded with their answers and the image they portrayed. They would always appear dressed in foreign style clothing and would depict themselves as Myanmar's biggest and baddest hip-hop superstars who had struggled to overcome censorship. In short, they displayed the kind of identity and sentiments that are reflected in Ward Keeler's study of Myanmar hip-hop.⁷⁶ After a few months, however, they seemed to realise a greater level of investment and interest in understanding their ideas and thoughts, and they shed the superficial hip-hop façade. A move from journalist to researcher seemed to have occurred, and the researcher role was a new concept for them. They started probing for information about foreign hip-hop styles and trends, and asking more questions about the research project. The author's apartment became something of a safe and free space for them to socialise in, as most lived with their parents, and they would often meet at the apartment before nights out. However, their wives and girlfriends who had spent less time overseas often remained sceptical, and the author remained a potential girlfriend and therefore a threat in their estimation. Many of the underground artists had fights with and had to regularly reassure their girlfriends of the platonic nature of their friendship with the author.

⁷⁶ Keeler, "What's Burmese about Burmese Rap?"

Indeed, many of the young men also continued to question the nature of the author's relationships with other young men.

It was also interesting how some of the young men and women leveraged the connections to various elite groups that arose from this research. For example, some of the underground rappers, who had the least disposable income, would accompany the author on nights out with the Yakuza. The underground artists were happy to have their nights out funded by the Yakuza, and the Yakuza enjoyed having underground artists in their group for the status gained by having a notorious or famous hip-hop artist in their posse. The Yakuza would tolerate outsiders joining them on a night out. However, they would not join other social groups' gatherings, as they preferred to be in control of all decisions and plans. The Yakuza were also the most possessive and would not tolerate the author spending time with other young men. After about a month with the Yakuza, it was necessary to use a well-timed visit back to Australia as an opportunity to break ties with them. Despite ending the association with the Yakuza, it took a few months before the rumours about links to them subsided, and security guards and patrons in bars and clubs stopped looking sideways at the author, seeming to whisper and speculate about what had happened.

The author's positionality indicated the nature of continuity and change after 2010. At first, the presence of a foreigner and a researcher was something of a novelty. Later, it was aligned with the influx of journalists since the groups had not encountered any foreign PhD candidates interested in social, cultural, and generational change.

Throughout though, the most persistent association arose from the idea that any young woman who went out at night with different young men must have been sexually promiscuous and of bad moral character. While this reputation restricted relationships with young women and their boyfriends, it also worked to align the author with some

elite young people who also felt like outcasts in Myanmar society. As generational change took hold, some young people said they enjoyed spending time with a foreigner because they did not feel judged. Unlike Myanmar people who would stare at their tattoos or strange foreign clothes, they said they felt like they could be themselves around a foreigner. While new identities were being introduced and the new generation was increasingly accepting of alternative lifestyles, many members of the wider population remained less accepting of challenges to traditional identities and roles.

Thesis outline

This Introduction has provided an overview of how this thesis disaggregates elite young people in Yangon to make sense of elite composition and practice in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016. Chapter 1 analyses the historical and conceptual cornerstones to situate this thesis in elite and youth literature. Generational change is a key argument, drawing on the foundational work of Karl Mannheim and the social generational approach academics to establish a framework for understanding how generational change occurs and how a new generation forms. In order to better understand the formation of a new generation, Chapter 1 also establishes Myanmar political culture in 2010 to contextualise the research.

Chapter 2 analyses the first threshold social group of the new generation, the Yakuza, to show how they clung to their legacies, often predicated on military associations, as Myanmar's born elite. These young men were mostly taciturn regarding the wider transformation of Myanmar, but often violently resisted specific threats to their dominance. They were quickly spurred to conflict and violence if they felt their authority or position was undermined or challenged by those they considered their inferiors.

Chapter 3 explores the cronies of Myanmar's business community. The cronies increasingly displayed independence from military and state control, becoming less reliant on state patronage and moving into new business realms including bars and nightclubs. The cronies worked to connect Myanmar into the global world, including by developing new businesses that reproduced foreign elite styles in Myanmar and catered to a growing middle and upper class in Myanmar.

Chapter 4 considers elite young women, titled *chit thus*, which is roughly translated from Burmese as "beloved." This title reflects the complicated and entwined nature of young women with notions of love, family, and relationships with young men. Elite young women tested and pushed at their boundaries, they fought for expanded career and education opportunities, and they adapted the conception of a good reputation to allow some frivolity and socialisation. Ultimately, however, they remained structurally disadvantaged alongside young men and were framed constantly according to their relationships with young men. While many expressed disdain and frustration with the double standard that existed for men and women, most accepted it as necessary for securing their futures.

Chapter 5 studies one of the outlier social groups of the new generation, the underground rappers. Before 2010, they had been forced to live on the peripheries of Myanmar society and popular culture, without the inherited legacies or wealth of the other elite young people. After 2010, these young men's elite status indicated the increasing value of cultural capital. They used their profile and fame to increase the value of authenticity in popular music, loosening the stranglehold *copy thachin*, or copy songs, had on popular music culture before 2010.⁷⁷ The underground rappers negotiated

⁷⁷ The rise of hip-hop as the popular music in Myanmar has occurred in a relatively short time period, replacing rock music and copy songs as detailed by Heather MacLachlan in *Burma's Pop Music Industry*.

their country's transformation and engagement with foreign influences for their audiences.

Chapter 6 scrutinises the other social group of elite young outliers, the creatives. These young men leveraged their privileged status as elite men, to approach Myanmar's liberalisation as an opportunity to imagine new worlds. They imagined and created new versions of Myanmar. They worked to appropriate foreign systems into local cultures, including art culture, fashion, and popular music. The creatives had a relatively progressive view of alternative identities and lifestyles, which, for some, included living as openly gay men.

Chapter 7 examines the *Thingyan* water festivals of 2013, 2014, and 2015 as instances when the new generation of elite young people co-opted a local practice according to their new ideas. *Thingyan* is an annual four day Buddhist New Year celebration when Myanmar people symbolically cleanse themselves with water. Young people succeeded in transforming the Buddhist celebration into a showcase for their identities, values, and culture in the festivals in 2013, 2014, and 2015. During these festivals, the new generation's values and their effects on existing Myanmar culture were on display. In response, the new generation received some negative attention from the older population. This disdain gave rise to government campaigns that re-established state control over the celebrations and young people.

The Conclusion assesses the evidence presented in the thesis body: that the five social groups were active in the process of generational change. Myanmar underwent a period of intense and rapid social change that gave rise to a new generation of elite young people to negotiate, resist, imagine, and create a country according to their values and identities. Myanmar is revalidated as a useful case study for analysing generational change during a period of rapid social change. Elite young people played an influential

role in raising the prominence of certain elite qualities in this moment of uncertainty and opportunity.

Chapter 1

Historical and Conceptual Cornerstones

This Chapter provides the historical and conceptual cornerstones necessary to approach the puzzle of how the new generation of elite young Myanmar people, described in the Introduction, mediated social and economic changes to influence societal transformation. The case study of the new generation in Myanmar invites an examination of the existing literature of the anthropology of youth. A review of the literature concluded with a decision to take a social generational approach derived from Karl Mannheim's original theory of generations. The social groups and structures researched extend beyond the parameters of class-based sociological theories, and are more fully analysed according to alternative elite-based theories. Importantly, elite theories recognise the potential influence of elite people who are not engaged in official political processes but instead possess social influence. This Chapter presents a more nuanced understanding of the theory of generations and elite-based theories and points to the tension between the two schools of thought. The tension between the theories relates to their treatment of continuity versus renewal that can occur in response to moments of rapid social change.

This Chapter also sets out the relevant historical cornerstones of Myanmar history. It analyses some crucial aspects of Myanmar's recent history to establish the Myanmar political culture that the new generation confronted. This political culture was shaped by the legacy of military rule and oppression; social mistrust and a culture of widespread scrutiny; and the impact of Buddhism on Myanmar's gender structure which prioritised

men above women. Together, these historical cornerstones provide a sense of the political culture that the elite new generation changed after 2010, including existing elite qualities and gender structures.

The theory of generations

A theory of generations argues that young people are key actors in shaping their society. Young people respond to moments of rapid social change through a process of generational change. The theory of generations originated with Karl Mannheim's 1923 essay "The Problem of Generations" and was adapted in the early 2000s when theorists developed what they called a "social generation approach."¹ The significance of generational change is established in several studies that appraise different societies in moments of change that represent a break with past generations' ways of doing things. Johanna Wyn and Dan Woodman's contribution in the early 2000's marked a major resurgence of generational thinking in sociology and anthropology, as the adapted social generational approach.² A social generational approach to the moment of Myanmar history supports an analysis of how dynamic global phenomenon interact with local structures, such as gender and social class.

Mannheim originally wrote that the "sociological phenomenon" of generations arise from the "biological rhythm of birth and death," but "to be *based* on a factor does not necessarily mean to be *deducible* from it, or to be implied in it."³ In a society, some individuals of roughly similar age may come to express unity around certain features and

¹ Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations"; Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn, "Changing Times, Changing Perspectives."

² Johanna Wyn and Dan Woodman, "Generation, Youth and Social Change in Australia" *Journal of Youth Studies* 9, no. 5 (2006).

³ Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 290.

thereby share a “social location,” resulting in what Mannheim calls a generation.⁴ This social location may mean generations have a common class position and consciousness, or common ways of thinking and approaches to social conditions.⁵ Mannheim adds that “contemporaneity becomes sociologically significant only when it also involves participation in the same historical and social circumstances.”⁶ Generational consciousness develops among young people when they reach the age of approximately seventeen and begin to question society and established conventions. If the current generations’ explanations are found to be lacking, young people will form a new generation to devise alternative answers.

The coexistence and interplay of generations are crucial to understanding how new generations arise. Mannheim lists five characteristics of generations, which also confirm their existence:

1. New participants in the cultural process are emerging,
2. Former participants in that process are continually disappearing,
3. Members of any one generation can participate only in a temporally limited section of the historical process,

⁴ The five social groups identified in Yangon could be considered five “generation units” according to Mannheim’s theory, “The Problem of Generations,” 379. However, the label of generation unit is overly constricting and does not accurately reflect the new generation in Myanmar related to one another or identified with a particular type. For this reason, while the argument that a new generation has formed in Myanmar is reminiscent of Mannheim’s argument that such generations form at moments of rapid social change, the identities and categories of young people are more usefully conceived as social groups rather than generation units, which implies more clear membership and boundaries than existed. For more on ‘generation units’ see David I. Kertzer, “Generation as a Sociological Problem,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983); Robert S. Laufer and Vern L. Bergtson, “Generations, Aging, and Social Stratification: On the Development of Generational Units,” *Journal of Social Issues* 30, no. 3 (1974); Alan B. Spitzer, “The Historical Problem of Generations,” *The American Historical Review* 78, no. 5 (1973).

⁵ *ibid*, 291.

⁶ *ibid*, 298.

4. It is, therefore, necessary continually to transmit the accumulated cultural heritage, and
5. The transition from generation to generation is a continuous process.⁷

This conception of generations posits that social regeneration and generational rejuvenation are cyclical rather than linear. In this cyclical model, there are varying levels of continuity across generations involving the active transmission of a generation's consciousness of ideas and behaviour between generations. Mannheim insists that generations co-exist in society, and "[g]enerations are in a state of constant interaction."⁸ As new generations arise, old generations adapt their consciousness in conversation with new generations developing alongside them.

According to Mannheim, the tempo of social change determines the rate and amount of change between (or, conversely, the continuity across) generations. Where a society experiences gradual and routine social progression, then more of the current generation's cultural heritage will be accepted by the new generation, who will only bolster this with minor adjustments. If a society undergoes a more sudden and rapid acceleration in the tempo of social change, then "basic attitudes must change so quickly that the latent, continuous adaption and modification of traditional patterns of experience, thought and expression is no longer possible."⁹ In these instances, "a clearly distinguishable new impulse, and a new centre of configuration" forms at a new generation style.¹⁰ Accordingly, a new generation is continually undergoing a process of negotiation, but the

⁷ Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 292.

⁸ Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 301.

⁹ *ibid*, 309.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 309.

overlap and commonality between generations are determined by the rate of social change at the time of their development.

Mannheim's ideas are taken up by John Borneman in a critical study of how a historical event impacted the development of Berlin generations: the Third Reich from 1933 to 1945.¹¹ Borneman analyses a generation that reached adulthood in Berlin from 1910 to 1935 during the Third Reich, and another generation that was born during the post-war period from 1940 to 1955. Mannheim's theory of generations was used as an analytical device to explain the significant differences a single historical event had on two cohorts of people, classed as two generations. Analysing these generations according to Mannheim's theory also revealed fluidity within and between generations, existing as they did in a shared social space.¹² For example, Borneman argues that the effects of different government policies towards the role of the family is reflected in the different power balances of the generations' gender relationships. State policies aimed at restoring sentimental familial kinship networks, including through "family-founding" marriage grants, valorised the family and women as mothers.¹³ Conversely, state policies intended to realise socialist ideals degraded the family unit and the identities of mothers, fathers, wives, and husbands. These socialist policies de-incentivised family cohabitation, framed individuals as workers, and portrayed the family as essentially childcare.¹⁴ Rapid social change and state-led policy shifts resulted in a new social location and the formation of a new generation. The new generation then reassessed society's personal and everyday techniques of the self and relationships according to that new social location.¹⁵

¹¹ John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins: Kin, State, Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹² John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins: Kin, State, Nation*, 287.

¹³ *ibid.*, 113-4.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 112.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 153.

Since the early 2000s, youth studies academics have been reworking Mannheim's theory of generations to counter their growing dissatisfaction with existing youth studies frameworks.¹⁶ Johanna Wyn and Dan Woodman¹⁷ argue that the psychosocial conceptualisation of "youth as transition," deployed by anthropologists such as Margaret Mead¹⁸ and Bronislaw Malinowski,¹⁹ is outdated. Instead, Wynn and Woodman propose a shift to a "generational" youth studies framework, conceiving of young people according to Mannheim's theory of generations.²⁰ As popular literature in the United Kingdom, Australia, and North America increasingly began to use labels such as Generation Y, Generation X, Generation Hex, The Lost Generation, Millenials, Baby Boomers, and Baby Busters the concept of successive cohorts of young people gained prominence.²¹ While the widespread use of these terms is simplistic and often contradictory, Wyn and Woodman brought the discussion into the academic realm, observing that "[i]mplicit in the term Gen Y, for example, is the assumption that this cohort of young people is contending with different social conditions from previous cohorts – and very probably from subsequent cohorts."²² From this base, Wyn and Woodman disrupt the previously dominant conception of youth as a transition, or "coming of age," stage between childhood and adulthood. They consider a generation as a cohort formed as a young person, in which the young person then progresses through life as a member.

¹⁶ Phil Cohen, *Rethinking the Youth Question*, (London: Macmillan, 1997); Jane Pilcher, "Mannheim's Sociology of Generations: An Undervalued Legacy" *The British Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 3 (1994); Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, "The Third Age: Class, Cohort or Generation?" *Ageing and Society* 22, no. 3 (2002).

¹⁷ See, for example, the exchange of Johanna Wyn and Dan Woodman with Ken Roberts: Wyn and Woodman, "Generation, Youth and Social Change in Australia"; Ken Roberts, "Youth Transitions and Generations: A Response to Wyn and Woodman," *Journal of Youth Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007); Johanna Wyn and Dan Woodman, "Researching Youth in a Context of Social Change: A Reply to Roberts" *Journal of Youth Studies* 10, no. 3 (2007).

¹⁸ Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation*, (New York: Morrow, 1928).

¹⁹ Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia*, (Boston: Beacon, [1929] 1987).

²⁰ Wyn and Woodman, "Generation, Youth and Social Change in Australia," 495.

²¹ *ibid*, 486.

²² *ibid*, 496.

In Myanmar, the most explicit popular usage of “generation” is the title “88 Generation,” which refers to the student protesters who led a populist uprising in 1988 against the military junta.²³ While the uprising ultimately failed to overthrow military rule, the 88 Generation remained an influential political group.²⁴ As theorised by the social generational approach, the 88 Generation have remained a coherent group despite growing older and reaching their 50s and 60s.²⁵ Elsewhere, the generation tag is popular in Myanmar hip-hop culture where it is used to categorise the evolution of Myanmar’s hip-hop scene through three generations, starting with the “first generation” of Myanmar hip-hop in the 1990s.²⁶ The current (third) generation of hip-hop artists is explored further in Chapter 5. Recently, the generation tag has also been used on social media forum Instagram, to denote fresh beginnings and something new for young people. The ways that these social media accounts often unite their generation around a shared style,

²³ For more on the ‘88 Generation and the 1988 student protests, see Kyaw Yin Hlaing, “Challenging the Authoritarian State: Buddhist Monks and Peaceful Protests in Burma,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2008); Kurt Shock, “People Power and Political Opportunities: Social Movement Mobilization and Outcomes in the Philippines and Burma,” *Social Problems* 46 (1999); Joseph Silverstein, “Burmese Student Politics in a Changing Society,” *Daedalus* 97 (1968).

²⁴ For example, the ‘88 Generation Students Group comprises former student leaders of the 1988 uprising, who were released from jail in 2004, including ‘88 Generation leader Min Ko Naing. Min Ko Naing is considered by some to be the second-most popular leader after Aung San Suu Kyi. Win Min, “Internal Dynamics of the Burmese Military: Before, During, and After the 2007 Demonstrations,” in *Dictatorship, Disorder and Decline in Myanmar*, eds. Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (Canberra: The Australian National University, 2008), 32.

²⁵ The ‘88 Generation were active in the 2007 “Saffron Revolution” in Myanmar, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung and Maung Aung Myoe, “Myanmar in 2007: A Turning Point in the ‘Roadmap’?” *Asian Survey* 48, no. 1 (2008); and in protests in 2015 against the National Education Law No 41/2014: Melissa Crouch, “Legislating Reform? Law and Conflict in Myanmar,” in *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*, eds. Nick Cheesman and Nicholas Farrelly (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2016); Nick Cheesman, “That Signifier of Desire, the Rule of Law,” *Social Research* 82, no. 2 (2015); AFP, “Myanmar Student Rally: Activists Beaten and Arrested During Demonstrations, Witnesses Say,” *ABC News Online*, March 6, 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-06/activists-beaten-arrested-in-myanmar-rally-witnesses/6284706>; Manzayar Oo and Jared Ferrie, “Baton-Wielding Myanmar Police Force Pro-Student Protesters to Flee,” *Reuters*, March 5, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-students-idUSKBN0M119D20150305>; “Timeline of Student Protests Against Education Law,” *The Irrawaddy*, March 10, 2015, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/timeline-of-student-protests-against-education-law.html>.

²⁶ Ye Yint Htay, “Three Generations in 15 Years: Where Next for Myanmar Hip-Hop?” *Mizzima Business Weekly*, April 16, 2015, <https://www.pressreader.com/myanmar/mizzima-business-weekly/20150416/281870116969519>.

identity, or lifestyle, to assist in the establishment of new identities and their contestation of elite dominion in Myanmar is explored further in Chapter 3.²⁷

Adding to the movement away from youth as a transitional period, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman argue that it is increasingly difficult to apply the age marker of “young people” in the context of “late modernity” or “liquid modernity.”²⁸ Late modernity or liquid modernity refers to the period currently experienced by many developed countries, marked by constant change and “fluidity” with the removal of many barriers as a result of globalisation and other processes. The global scale of social changes relegates significant portions of young peoples’ parents’ and grandparents’ experiences into insignificance. Young people have more extended periods in education than earlier generations, and they participate in a significantly different labour market. Youth is no longer a clearly demarcated transitional period between schooling and entering the workforce.

Responding to the changed nature of “youth,” Andy Furlong, Dan Woodman, and Johanna Wyn developed what they call a “social generation approach.” They argue that young people renegotiate core values and “promote reflexive life management and the framing of life as an ongoing project largely devoid of explicit markers.”²⁹ A social generational approach considers the impact of complex factors, such as cultures and varied interpretations, alongside the more straightforward, such as gender and class. By examining a range of factors, the social generational approach frames the formation of a

²⁷ For example, there is an Instagram account, which claims to represent the new generation in Myanmar and displays pictures of various Myanmar socialites and celebrities surrounded by luxury goods, and on holiday in foreign hotels, malls, and resorts. W Generation’s Instagram page, accessed August 2017, @WGeneration.

²⁸ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

²⁹ Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn, “Changing Times, Changing Perspectives,” 362.

new generation occurring when a cohort of young people encounter a similar set of circumstances and devise new explanations.

A social generational approach argues that by analysing young people's development researchers can reveal characteristics of society more broadly. In their study of the ways that recent socio-economic changes challenge traditional ways of interpreting subjectivities, Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn argue that by studying young people "we build an awareness of the ways young people interpret, construct and shape their lives within a given set of circumstances, and can even give new insights into the nature of these circumstances."³⁰ Young people actively frame their identities and lives, but also their society, through the process of establishing themselves as a new generation. They negotiate morals, identities, norms, and attitudes which gain valency in society and impact on established generations and society itself. According to this generation approach, young people – especially elite young people – can influence government policies, development projects, economic outlooks, and international engagement.

Demonstrating the influence of a new generation of young people on political, economic, and cultural practices, Wyn and Woodman's analysis of two generations of Australians is helpful when considering the case in Myanmar. Wyn and Woodman's study considered two generations, one born in the wake of World War II and the other born decades later.³¹ By analysing data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics associated with the two generations, they provide evidence to support their argument that the end of the war catalysed a change of generation and state policy. The study pointed to a shift in the

³⁰ *ibid.*, 357.

³¹ A comparison of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' figures from 1976, when "Baby Boomers" (a generation of people born in post-war Australia between 1946 and 1965) were in their twenties, and 2001, when the post-1970 generation was in their twenties. Wyn and Woodman, "Generation, Youth and Social Change in Australia."

state's policies after the war, which framed young people as "primarily a human resource for economic development, as students, consumers and 'flexible workers'."³² These state policies pushed young people into work and education. As a result, the number of people living as a couple with children decreased, religious affiliation declined, and women attending educational institutions increased.³³

The social generation approach, as demonstrated by Wyn and Woodman's study, explains that a new generation can form in response to a shared social moment of change, which may include changes to state policies. Once initiated, a new generation works to mediate identities and lifestyles that fit the changed circumstances, in ways that can change established political, economic, and cultural practices. In Myanmar, between 2010 and 2016, the first two events in this sequence can be clearly identified: the first, a significant moment of change, and then a shift in state policies. In the third stage, changes to established political, economic, and cultural practices were beginning to be visible among elite young people. These changes are examined throughout this thesis, including changes to employment and educational practices, and changes to popular culture, identities, and lifestyles.

Elite values and influence

By changing the political, economic, and cultural practice of Myanmar, the members of the new generation were also mediating the society's elite qualities. Some theorists of the elite, including Eva Etzioni-Halevy and C. Wright Mills, have examined elite qualities and the elite people who embody them.³⁴ These academics establish that elite people are

³² *ibid*, 504.

³³ *ibid*, 507.

³⁴ Mosca, *The Ruling Class*; Eva Etzioni-Halvey, "Elites, Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in Ultramodern Society," *International Review of Sociology* 9, no. 2 (1999); C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

those who have the potential to influence decision making and instigate change. The role of elite *young* people is less evident in the existing elite studies literature. This thesis contributes a greater understanding of elite young people by combining a concern with the elite with a social generational approach to understand the role of elite young people in mediating social and economic change into elite composition and practice in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016. The literature on elites provides two critical ideas to this analysis: that the specific nature of elites is determined by the social characteristics of that society, and, thereby, changing elite qualities indicate changing societal characteristics; and that the qualities that make people elite tend to be inherited by their children, which renders them more durable.³⁵

To understand what qualities are considered elite in a society, it is first necessary to distinguish between the two types of elite theory, *normative* elite theory and *analytical* elite theory. Normative elite theory focuses on the moral, intellectual, or otherwise superior qualities that entitle certain people to rule. An analytical elite approach is concerned with studying the lived experiences of societies rather than normative aspirations, and is the preferred approach in this thesis.³⁶ Analytical elite theory argues that the elite do not rule by force or fraud, but as a result of a human need for minority rule.³⁷ Minority rulers are those people in possession of the qualities that society considers valuable: the elite qualities. It follows that the elite qualities of a society reflect something of that society's characteristics, whether an admiration for that quality or its necessity to effective rule.

³⁵ The NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi have been seen to converge with other political elites, including the military in recent years, see Timothy Simonson, "The Taming of the NLD...by the NLD," *New Mandala*, August 12, 2015, <http://www.newmandala.org/the-taming-of-the-nld-by-the-nld/>.

³⁶ Gerhard Lenski, "In Praise of Mosca and Michels," *Mid-American Review of Sociology* V (1980), 2; Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, 50; Arthur Livingston, "Introduction," in *The Ruling Class*, Gaetano Mosca, translated by Arthur Livingston (McGraw-Hill Book Company: New York, 1939); Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, translated by Arthur Livingston (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1939).

³⁷ Bottomore (1993 [1964]): 5.

If a society's characteristics are reflected in its elite qualities, Eva Etzioni-Halevy, an elite theorist, reasons that as society changes so too do the qualities that make a person elite.³⁸ In a moment of rapid social change and uncertainty in Myanmar, elite young people led a reconsideration of the country's elite qualities. The reconsideration of elite qualities in Myanmar included the rise of cultural capital as a valuable form of capital able to confer elite status. The rise of cultural capital as an elite quality was validated by the new elite status of underground rappers.

It is easy to identify key moments or periods that result in generational change, such as 2010 in Myanmar. It is more difficult to separate cause from effect regarding changes that occur in these periods. Organising the elite new generation into five social groups assists in identifying the degree to which members of the new generation were either shaped by widespread changes beyond their control, or active participants working to change Myanmar society. For example, the diminishment of the elite status of the Yakuza, despite their violent protestations, indicated that social changes were undermining their legacies. On the other end of the spectrum, the new elite status of some underground rappers was both an effect of new flows of information and people, and also caused by the artists' success interpreting and mediating these flows into popular culture.

To assist in an analysis of a specific society's elite qualities and elite groups, C. Wright Mills 1956 book, *The Power Elite*, is instructive. In the book, Mills provides an exposé of American networks of power and the excessive concentration of power in what he calls the country's "higher circles" at the time.³⁹ While *The Power Elite* is a useful example of

³⁸ Etzioni-Halevy, "Elites, Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in Ultramodern Society."

³⁹ Most notably and importantly celebrities, who rarely feature in considered academic studies. See Mills, *The Power Elite*, 71-94.

the analytical elite approach in practice,⁴⁰ it is limited in its transferability to another context as the substance is intentionally ethnocentrically confined to America at that particular moment. Mills identifies three core elite values – economic, political and military – and analyses several elite groups he argues were in possession of those values, including the Celebrities, the Very Rich, the Corporate Rich, the Military Ascendancy, and the Political Directorate.⁴¹ Importantly, he identifies both governing and non-governing individuals as potentially influential in national decision making. He goes on to reveal that while there is frequent collaboration and engagement between some elite people and groups, there is not a larger or clearly articulated conspiracy among elite groups. Mills is also quick to point out that while the elite has the power to make national decisions, that “is not to say that the powerful are united, that they fully know what they do, or that they are consciously joined in conspiracy.”⁴² Mills’ interpretation and application of elite theory to America identifies non-political actors as potentially elite, contends that elites are not necessarily united, and that elite people are not necessarily conscious of their influence. These features of America’s elite people are also visible in the Myanmar case.

Despite the popularity of Mills’ study of the American power elite, it has been criticised for not offering tangible evidence of how elite people actually exert influence. Robert A. Dahl, in *A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model*, argues that Mills set out to identify the American elites as those who could exert political influence and decision making power, but that he did not offer specific instances of the American elite making any such

⁴⁰ Google Scholar lists *The Power Elite* as having been cited almost 7,000 times, and it continues to be referenced as relevant in contemporary studies of the US and in comparative studies of the UK and elsewhere. G. William Domhoff, “C. Wright Mills 50 Years Later,” *Contemporary Sociology* 35, no. 6 (2006); Anthony Giddens, “Elites in the British Class Structure,” *The Sociological Review* 20, no. 3 (1972).

⁴¹ This list is not comprehensive or up to date, of course. Some have made suggestions for additions in the past, including D. Michael Lindsay, “Evangelicals in the Power Elite: Elite Cohesion Advancing a Movement,” *American Sociological Review* 73 (2008).

⁴² Mills, *The Power Elite*.

decisions.⁴³ Dahl argues that Mills is oversimplifying society by “interpret[ing] complex social systems essentially as instances of a ruling elite.”⁴⁴ In some ways, Dahl appears to have misread the argument and scope of Mill’s treatise, which does not claim to show how elite networks influence society. Rather, *The Power Elite* succeeds in its goal of uncovering and detailing those power elite networks in America. Any argument that is made about how they actually influenced American society is made in relation to how those elite networks changed as a result of changing elite values.⁴⁵ Mills’ research is useful for uncovering networks of power and potential influence, showing how elite values shift, and the various types of elite people in a society.

As demonstrated by Mills, an elite-based approach can provide for a nuanced and flexible consideration of social stratification. An elite-based approach results in a more comprehensive analysis of who and what is influential in a society, rather than the more codified class-based approaches. While this flexibility can make it difficult to know where to draw the distinction between elite and non-elite, it also invites research that considers qualities other than financial capital. A class-based approach to the new generation in Myanmar would overlook the significance of changes not related to financial capital and inherited wealth. A class-based approach would simply categorise young people into the upper-, middle-, and lower/working-class according to their financial position. This simple categorisation would, for example, ignore the underground rappers and amalgamate the creatives with the cronies. An elite-based approach assists in revealing

⁴³ Robert A. Dahl, “A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model,” *The American Political Science Review* 52, no. 2 (1958).

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ A later work by G. William Domhoff posits that Mills’ assessment holds up when applied in such a way – doing so by looking at the way coalitions of the power elite, as conceived by Mills, have been involved in policy decisions such as the 1935 Social Security Act, the 1946 Employment Act and the 1935 National Labor Relations Act passed despite widespread opposition. See Domhoff, *The Power Elite and the State*.

the multiplicity of power bases and the complex interaction with different systems that contributed to the rise and fall of different elite qualities in Myanmar.

This thesis seeks to understand how elite values rise and fall over time by considering how elite advantage can be inherited alongside the re-evaluation of elite values that occurs during the process of generational change. By considering generational change alongside elite inheritance, this approach avoids the potential pitfalls of interpreting complex social systems solely as instances of elite rule.⁴⁶ The period of 2010 to 2016 in Myanmar was a moment of coalescing and shifting elite interests, with the added upheaval of generational change rendering other systems and meanings uncertain.⁴⁷ This already complex process was also occurring alongside the rapid social changes associated with the integration of the former pariah state into global flows of information and people.

The literature on generations argues that new generations are formed in moments of rapid social change. That argument is built on by considering elites as particularly influential in that new generation. Elites are influential, particularly in moments of social change, as they negotiate their society's elite values. Further, as a generation progresses through life, members of that elite cohort grow with them, continuing to consolidate and negotiate those elite values. Understanding the moment that formed a new generation is relevant for understanding what those dominant values arose in response to, and relatedly who came to embody them. The moment that sparked Myanmar's new generation was a rapid transformation following an elite-led political transition (for Borneman it was the Third Reich). By analysing the period that preceded that moment of rapid social transformation in Myanmar, this thesis points to the tension between

⁴⁶ Dahl, "A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model."

⁴⁷ Etzioni-Halvey, "Elites, Inequality and the Quality of Democracy"; Mills, *The Power Elite*.

continuity and change in moments of social and economic upheaval. The new generation interprets and incorporates some change into this transformation, which is also marked by the persistence of some existing elite qualities through generational change.

Expounding on the durability of certain elite qualities, the second idea taken from elite theory relates to the inheritance of elite qualities. Etzioni-Halevy argues that a “tyranny of merit” arises in a society over time.⁴⁸ The tyranny of merit explains that structural disadvantage increases across generations, as an elite quality becomes ingrained as elite. Those in possession of merit⁴⁹ succeed and gain ever more advantage while those who do not become more and more disadvantaged over time and inequalities grow.⁵⁰ With the advance of these forms of merit, the importance of the inherited advantage of class becomes less significant.⁵¹ An elite quality is more fortified in a society as it survives various periods of change. The idea that some elite qualities are more durable than others accounts for the perseverance of certain legacy elite qualities through the generational change in Myanmar. In Myanmar, decades of military rule fortified a tyranny of merit among its elite people who inherited legacies of privilege and acceded into positions of power. The tyranny of merit in Myanmar was visible in the continued elite status of the Yakuza and the cronies, despite challenges to the value of the qualities that made them elite. Most notably, the decline of the necessity of military prowess or experience for the country’s political elite did not completely deplete the social status of the children of the country’s former military leaders. Myanmar’s transformation draws out the tension

⁴⁸ Etzioni-Halevy, “Elites, Inequality and the Quality of Democracy,” 240.

⁴⁹ Merit includes “certain types of intelligence, creativity, versatility, adaptability, ambition, a drive for achievement, diligence, competitiveness, and ability to cope with the stress of a hyper-competitive environment, in which employment is precarious and uncertain,” *ibid*.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, 249.

⁵¹ Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters, *The Death of Class* (London: Sage Publications, 1996).

between the tyranny of merit arising from elite theory and the transformative focus of a social generational approach.⁵²

Myanmar political culture

Related to the inheritance of some remnants of Myanmar's tyranny of merit, the new generation also inherited some characteristics of Myanmar's political culture.⁵³ Myanmar's political culture was moulded by durable legacies of military rule, which included an ideological focus on the indispensability of military rule to state stability and security. This ideology bolstered the social status and mentality of the Yakuza and, to a lesser extent, the cronies. In addition to the legacies of military indispensability, military rule in Myanmar also created institutions that fostered conformity, mistrust, and an atmosphere of scrutiny. In this atmosphere of conformity, unequal gender relations and roles were reinforced by Buddhist beliefs. The ways elite young people mediated changes or levelled challenges to these aspects of the country's political culture indicated their impact on elite composition and practice in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016. After 2010, the military, pervasive mistrust, and gender hierarchies remained important cornerstones. However,

⁵² Etzioni Halvey takes her theory of the tyranny of merit further to discuss how elite groups can form a "new elite connection" and work for their mutual benefit, explaining something of Myanmar's past elite connections primarily between the military and the business community of Myanmar – explored further in Chapters 2 and 3. Etzioni-Halvey argued that this connection includes "business magnates, political leaders of the right-, centre and left-wing parties...of trade unions, and academic intellectuals" in what she calls "hypermodern societies", which include most Western societies, although her research has focused primarily on Israel. See *The Elite Connection: Problems and Potential of Western Democracy*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); *Fragile Democracy: The Use and Abuse of Power in Western Societies*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989); *Social Change: The Advent and Maturation of Modern Society*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); *The Knowledge Elite and the Failure of Prophecy*, (London, Boston: G. Allen & Unwin, 1985); "Administrative Power in Israel" *Israel Affairs* 8, no. 4 (2002): 25-44. The hypermodern society is driven by the pursuit of "privatisation, market forces, the lowering of taxes...and expenditure, deregulation and free trade, competition and what may be termed 'the merit of merit' and, of course, globalisation," Etzioni-Halvey, 'Elites, Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in Ultramodern Society': 242-3.

⁵³ The term "political culture" is used to refer to attitudes, opinions, and sentiments of the population related to politics and political action, with an awareness of the criticism and debates surrounding its uses and history, see Ronald Formisano, "The Concept of Political Culture," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31, no. 3 (2001); Stephen Chilton, "Defining Political Culture," *Western Political Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1 September 1988).

some of the groups of the new generation challenged their centrality to the country's political culture, to varying success.⁵⁴ An analysis of these characteristics of Myanmar's political culture and how the new generation engaged with them follows.

Military legacies

The political culture of the existing generation of Myanmar society has been shaped in large part by the rhetoric of the country's military. Renaud Egreteau describes the ideology of the praetorian state and how the military's motivation as the country's defender impacted on many of its beliefs and actions.⁵⁵ The term "praetorian" derives from the original Roman Praetorian Guard, an elite unit of soldiers that were the Emperor's bodyguards in ancient Rome.⁵⁶ The Praetorian Guard came to command significant political power, including in matters of succession, assassinating emperors, bullying prefects, and the "auctioning" of Rome in 193.⁵⁷ In political science literature, "praetorian state" refers to instances where the military commands a political role.⁵⁸ Praetorian politics were visible in Myanmar, where, following the coup in 1962, the

⁵⁴ Renaud Egreteau, "Myanmar: Transition, Praetorian Politics, and the Prospects for Democratic Change," in *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Democratization*, ed. William Case (Routledge: Oxon, 2015); Christina Fink, *Living Silence in Burma: Surviving Under Military Rule* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2009); Matthew Walton, "Buddhism, Politics, and Political Change," in *Myanmar: The Dynamics of an Evolving Polity*, ed. David Steinberg (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2015).

⁵⁵ Renaud Egreteau, *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma: Understanding the Foreign Relations of the Burmese Praetorian State* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2013); The 71st Armed Forces Day, the annual celebration of the armed forces parade in Naypyidaw on 27 March 2016, days before the new non-military president was sworn in, was a significant show of force. The long-time state-propaganda mouth piece, *The New Global Light of Myanmar*, ran a front page spread of the display, with the very clear and large heading: "HERE TO STAY." The Commander-in-Chief's speech was also clear that the armed forces would continue to ensure "chaotic democratisation" did not occur. Billboards announcing the parade read "Armed forces and the people cooperate and crush all those harming the Union," see Olivia Cable, "Eve of Myanmar's Armed Forces Day 2016," *New Mandala*, March 26, 2016, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2016/03/26/eve-of-myanmars-armed-forces-day-2016/>.

⁵⁶ Lawrence Keppie, "The Praetorian Guard Before Sejanus," *Athenaeum* 84 (1996).

⁵⁷ Sandra Bingham, *The Praetorian Guard: A History of Rome's Elite Special Forces* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

⁵⁸ Peter Bertocci, "Bangladesh in the Early 1980s: Praetorian Politics in an Intermediate Regime," *Asian Survey* 22, no. 10 (1982); Amos Perlmutter, *Egypt: The Praetorian State* (New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1974); Amos Perlmutter, "The Praetorian State and the Praetorian Army: Toward a Taxonomy of Civil-Military Relations in Developing Polities," *Comparative Politics* 1, no. 3 (1969); John Stockwell, *The Praetorian Guard: The U.S. Role in the New World Order* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1991).

military played an active role propagating the ideological necessity of military protection and defence for the Myanmar state.⁵⁹ At the heart of the military's ideology was the indispensability of the military to state stability and security. Ethnic groups who made up a large proportion of the population outside the Bamar-dominated heartland of Myanmar were the real and perceived threats to that security, and were used to justify the military's control of the country.

Since the 2010 managed transition of power away from overt military rule, Egreteau argues that the military has ensured its continued influence in policy-making through what he calls "military reserve domains."⁶⁰ These reserve domains include the military's constitutionally protected 25 percent representation in the National Legislature, their dominant shares in state-owned enterprises, and a Foreign Investment Law requiring international companies to partner with domestic companies that often have substantial military involvement.⁶¹ Due to the perseverance of military power, through these reserve domains, Egreteau argues that the military's role in Myanmar since 2010 can be classified as a "move down the scale of praetorian behaviour," rather than the end.⁶² The military signalled that they intended to continue to exert influence over the National Legislature through their contingent of retired military officers. Elsewhere, the military has continued to play a key role in national reconciliation efforts with the ethnic groups.⁶³

Since 2010 there has been a substantial political change, however, there has been no significant "revolution or political upheaval."⁶⁴ Egreteau argues that the "very same elites

⁵⁹ For more on the various military junta's policies and politics, see Ian Holliday, *Burma Redux: Global Justice and the Quest for Political Reform in Myanmar* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁶⁰ Egreteau, "Myanmar: Transition, Praetorian Politics," 418.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 418; The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Law No. 21/201, November 22, 2012.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Renaud Egreteau, "Emerging Patterns of Parliamentary Politics," in *Myanmar: The Dynamics of an Evolving Polity*, ed. David Steinberg (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2015).

⁶⁴ Egreteau, "Myanmar: Transition, Praetorian Politics."

still dominate the Burmese ‘post-transition’ political landscape; and the complex network of entrenched social, economic, and political clientelist relationships established at all levels of Burmese society over several decades of military-led authoritarianism is far from being dismantled.”⁶⁵ Other academics, and this thesis, contest the claim that the “very same elites” dominate Myanmar post-2010⁶⁶ and that Myanmar can be classified as a praetorian state.⁶⁷ However, it is clear that the military has remained active in Myanmar politics since 2010 and Egreteau’s work points to some of the social and cultural values that support that involvement. For example, as with other Asian countries where patron-client networks dominate societies, the personification of power in Myanmar is a continued barrier to the independence, longevity, and capacity of local structures and agencies.⁶⁸ In line with this, the resistant behaviours of the Yakuza, which are a continuation of elite military legacies, are analysed in Chapter 2. The Yakuza violently resisted changes that threatened their legacies and deployed violence to trigger memories of the military’s historical dominance.

Throughout the decades of military rule, from 1962 until 2010, Myanmar’s hierarchies and power relations have shifted. Various parties have been involved in these shifts, including military factions vying for influence;⁶⁹ cronies competing for military

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ “What is remarkable is just how much has changed since the formal end of the SPDC era in 2011,” Nicholas Farrelly, “Myanmar’s Conflicted Politics” in *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*, eds. Nick Cheesman and Nicholas Farrelly (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2016), 4; Nicholas Farrelly and Chit Win, “Inside Myanmar’s Turbulent Transformation,” *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016); “Regardless of the military’s motives, however, it ultimately did cede significant power to the NLD in 2015,” Alexander Dukalskis, “Myanmar’s Double Transition: Political Liberalization and the Peace Process,” *Asian Survey* 57, no. 4 (2017), 721.

⁶⁷ Alexander Dukalskis, “Stateness Problems or Regime Unification? Explaining Obstacles to Democratization in Burma/Myanmar,” *Democratization* 16, no. 5 (2009); Stephen McCarthy, *The Political Theory of Tyranny in Singapore and Burma: Aristotle and the Rhetoric of Benevolent Despotism* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁶⁸ Egreteau, “Myanmar: Transition, Praetorian Politics.”

⁶⁹ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, “Power and Factional Struggles in Post-Independence Burmese Governments,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39 (2008); Kyaw Yin Hlaing “Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 34, no. 2 (2012).

patronage;⁷⁰ armed ethnic groups demanding recognition;⁷¹ Buddhist monks and monasteries claiming discrete authority;⁷² foreign governments;⁷³ and international actors.⁷⁴ Some of these shifts have been subtle adjustments of power while others have been very public and sometimes violent, primarily when military factions have gained authority and backing only to be brutally disposed of when they overstep their boundaries.⁷⁵ Mary Callahan argues that the armed forces are not adept at reinvention and reformation, and have failed to redefine or transform themselves convincingly, despite various attempted transformations. These attempted transformations include a change of dictator; a quasi-coup; numerous name changes; and a new capital city in Naypyidaw.⁷⁶ In a 2009 article, Callahan pointed to the military's great failure as their inability to change from the "repertoire of ethnic division and state repression" which remained the "reflected legacy of their own rule."⁷⁷ While the military has proven reluctant to retreat from their role in ethnic division since 2010, as witnessed in ongoing atrocities against the Rohingya peoples in Rakhine State,⁷⁸ there is evidence that they have retreated from their role in the widespread repression of Myanmar. Chapter 2 identifies the beginnings of a possible reinvention of the military, with the tentative

⁷⁰ Lee Jones, "The Political Economy of Myanmar's Transition," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44, no. 1 (2014).

⁷¹ South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma*.

⁷² Bruce Matthews, "Buddhism under a Military Regime: The Iron Heel in Burma," *Asian Survey* 33, no. 4 (1993); McCarthy, "Overturning the Alms Bowl."

⁷³ Andrew Selth, "Burma's 'Saffron Revolution' and the Limits of International Influence," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 3 (2008).

⁷⁴ Judith White, "Globalisation, Divestment and Human Rights in Burma," *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* 14 (2004).

⁷⁵ For example, in 2004, then Prime Minister Khin Nyunt was arrested and convicted of corruption when "the threat he posed to the coherence of the regime by building up his own power base within the coercive apparatus outweighed his institutional value," Susanne Prager Nyein, "Expanding Military, Shrinking Citizenry and the New Constitution in Burma," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 39, no. 4 (2009).

⁷⁶ Mary Callahan, "Myanmar's Perpetual Junta: Solving the Riddle of the Tatmadaw's Long Reign," *New Left Review* 60 (2009).

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 63.

⁷⁸ Nick Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017); Helal Mohammed Khan, "Threat Perceptions in the Myanmar-Bangladesh Borderlands," in *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, Religion*, eds. Nick Cheesman and Nicholas Farrelly (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2016); Chit Win and Thomas Kean, "Communal Conflict in Myanmar: The Legislature's Response, 2012-2015," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017).

positioning of former dictator Than Shwe's grandson, Nay Shwe Thway Aung, as a potentially legitimate political actor.

Legacies of military rule, which shaped the dominant elite values in Myanmar before 2010, were increasingly challenged by generational change. Elite young men who inherited legacies of elite influence were forced to respond to the same social moment. The Yakuza were members of the new generation, as they responded to the same social moment as other elite young people in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016. However, they worked to resist changes and violently defend their legacies in the face of widespread generational change. As these young men mostly propagated the legacy elite values of the existing generation, trying to carry them through into the new generation, these elite young men were positioned as a threshold group of the new generation. Reflecting Callahan's indictment of the armed force's inability to change, so this threshold social group worked to continue the dominance of their elite qualities over new elite qualities. The tension between this continuity and discontinuity through generational change teases out the broader tension between elite theory and the theory of generations. Teasing out this tension provides a more nuanced understanding of how certain elite values are threatened and how those elite individuals who possess them react to those threats. The legacy of decades of military rule visibly persisted, albeit weakened or slightly reframed, through generational change, as embodied by the Yakuza analysed in Chapter 2 and the cronies in Chapter 3.

Social mistrust and scrutiny

In addition to creating durable legacies, decades of military rule had a profound effect on the wider population and its institutions. Christina Fink's *Living Silence* details how Myanmar's institutions, including the state, family, and community, came to create

people as “instruments of the regime” through their silence.⁷⁹ While the military lessened its grip on Myanmar society after the 2010 elections, remnants and memories of their regime continued through families and communities enforcing strict guidelines for behaviour. Despite the official relaxation, the civilian population continued to suffer from the memory of persistent fear. After 2010, there was considerable uncertainty and the population’s vulnerability was in some cases intensified by the relaxation of formal constraints on their behaviour. The population were left to speculate on and pre-empt what behaviours may draw state attention, without the comparative certainty that military control had conferred.

Of particular importance to the new generation of elite young people analysed in this thesis are Fink’s observations about communities which, she writes, “also participate in sanctioning people who dare to rock the boat, because they are seen as possibly endangering the rest of the community.”⁸⁰ While the country had been officially democratised and the state apparatus of control ostensibly dismantled, the collective memory proved not so easily undone. The majority of the population continued to be animated by memories of the past, as seen in instances of self-censorship and resistance to modernisation, most explicit in the underground hip-hop community analysed in Chapter 5.⁸¹

For many in the Myanmar community, strategies of survival remained necessary, as instances of state oppression continued under the new government. After 2010, instances of state oppression included various cases of press censorship, such as the arrest of journalists under draconian laws, and state complicity in the violent repression of some

⁷⁹ Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*, 136.

⁸⁰ Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*, 140.

⁸¹ Ellen Wiles, *Saffron Shadows and Salvaged Scripts: Literary Life in Myanmar under Censorship and in Transition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

minority groups.⁸² New cultural practices and identities continued to be met with hostility and judgement, and it proved challenging to meter vigilance as appropriate in various circumstances. The tried and tested survival strategy of the past, to repress anything that could potentially elicit state punishment or retaliation, still lingered after 2010 and the young people of Myanmar continued to feel them keenly when they faced a distrusting community still fearful of and deferential towards the military.

Myanmar society remained heavy with memories of years under military scrutiny. The existing generation's oppressor was the military: the new generation's resistance came from the existing generation. Young people self-censored and expressed anxiety about pushing the boundaries of the status quo. Some members of the elite new generation were conferred with a degree of insulation and protection from the wider population and law enforcement by virtue of their elite status, influential networks, and financial security. The level of insulation was dependent on the kind of elite values that the young people possessed. For example, the Yakuza imbued with legacy capital were able to act without concern for public scrutiny. In contrast, the underground rappers were reliant on cultural capital derived from their fame, which was the result of their fans' support, and had considerably more regard for public opinion. The political culture of mistrust and public scrutiny prevailed beyond 2010, and the tension between this culture and the new generation is explored throughout this thesis.

Gender, Buddhism, and nationalism

Another aspect of Myanmar's political culture that the new generation engaged with was the influence of Buddhism on the Myanmar polity. The new generation worked to change gender roles and mediate foreign influences into local practices in ways that were

⁸² *"They Can Arrest You at Any Time:" The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in Myanmar* (Human Rights Watch, 2016), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/29/they-can-arrest-you-any-time/criminalization-peaceful-expression-burma#page>.

often perceived as in opposition to Buddhist precepts. Historically, Buddhism was both a uniting force and a divisive element in Myanmar society, contributing to gender inequality and suspicion of foreign cultures and different religions. Alicia Turner argues that under colonial rule a key discourse of Buddhism was the creation of a “moral community” of collective belonging.⁸³ After colonial rule, Buddhism remained important to the Myanmar population, providing religious support as they suffered through decades of military rule.⁸⁴ Christina Fink describes how under military rule, the military penetrated the religious world, to legitimate their own rule and to control monks as alternative centres of political authority.⁸⁵ Gustaaf Houtman details how meditative forms of Buddhism flourished under the military junta and helped some to explain their country’s hermit status, their imprisonment in their selves, and to justify their mundane existence.⁸⁶

Since 2010, Buddhism remained a durable unifier of the Myanmar nation. Communal tensions and violence against Muslim people, most concentrated and vitriolic against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, have sought to unite Buddhists through the creation of the Muslim scapegoat.⁸⁷ The narrative of the Muslim perpetrator has been quickly ensconced in the retelling of Myanmar’s history.⁸⁸ Women are used in this discourse, with their bodies representative of Myanmar and rumours of their rape by Muslim men cited as evidence of Islam’s desecration of Buddhism.⁸⁹ Buddhist men are construed as the

⁸³ Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014); Alicia Turner, “Narratives of Nation, Questions of Community: Examining Burmese Sources without the Lens of Nation,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 15, No. 2 (December 2011).

⁸⁴ Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999).

⁸⁵ Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*, 226-247.

⁸⁶ Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, 36, 196.

⁸⁷ Gerry van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung, “The Contentious Politics of Anti-Muslim Scapegoating in Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017).

⁸⁸ Matt Schissler, Matthew Walton, and Phyu Phyu Thi, “Reconciling Contradictions: Buddhist-Muslim Violence, Narrative Making, and Memory in Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017).

⁸⁹ Gerard McCarthy and Jacqueline Menager, “Gendered Rumours and the Muslim Scapegoat in Myanmar’s Transition,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017).

protectors of women and the nation, justifying violence against Muslim threats.⁹⁰ These narratives link into broader ideas of Buddhism's besiegement and millenarism, the idea that Buddhism is in decline.⁹¹

Some interpreted the sudden influx of foreign influences and styles as a threat to Buddhism's influence over Myanmar institutions and ideas of nationalism.⁹² Buddhism is a central element of Myanmar society,⁹³ and the conservative tendencies it has promulgated in Myanmar combine with targeted campaigns to unite Bamar Buddhists against outsiders, creating a mindset unaccommodating of change.⁹⁴ Aung San Suu Kyi herself has previously said, "[t]o be Burmese is to be Buddhist."⁹⁵ Bamar Buddhists continue to vastly outnumber other ethnicities and religions in the elite make up of Myanmar society, although the number of people of Chinese descent is growing significantly in the business community. The image of the privileged Bamar Buddhist man is perpetrated through narratives of Myanmar as a Buddhist nation and men as its dominant leaders. In addition to privileging one ethnic group and religion over all others in Myanmar, the rhetoric also privileges men over women. Since 2010, the new generation has introduced alternatives to this Bamar Buddhist masculinity.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ Gerard McCarthy and Jacqueline Menager, "Viral Rumours and the Quotidian Cultivation of Political Identity in Myanmar," in *Communal Violence in Myanmar*, ed. Nick Cheesman and Htoo Kyaw Win (Yangon: Myanmar Knowledge Society and Australian National University, 2015).

⁹² Matthew Walton, "The Post-Election Future of Buddhist Nationalism in Myanmar," *East Asia Forum*, November 19, 2015, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/11/19/the-post-election-future-of-buddhist-nationalism-in-myanmar/>.

⁹³ Matthew Walton, "The 'Wages of Burman-ness': Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013), 11.

⁹⁴ Matthew Walton, "Politics in the Moral Universe: Burmese Buddhist Political Thought," (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2012), http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/Walton_2012-thesis-Burmese_Buddhist_Political_Thought.pdf; Juliane Schober, "Buddhist Just Rule and Burmese National Culture: State Patronage of the Chinese Tooth Relic in Myanma," *History of Religions* 36, no. 3 (1997).

⁹⁵ Michael Gravers, "Questioning Autocracy in Burma: Buddhism Between Traditionalism and Modernism," in *Questioning the Secular State: The Worldwide Resurgence of Religion in Politics*, ed. David Westerlund (London: Hurst and Company, 2002), 297.

Some Myanmar feminists highlight the impact of the Theravada Buddhist conception of *hpone* (power) in the buttressing of the country's strict gender hierarchy. The quality of *hpone* is restricted to men only, constraining women's "opportunities and adding religious approval to misogyny and gender discrimination."⁹⁶ Khin Mar Kyi says that *hpone* was "one of the things that was recreated [by nationalist leaders] to give a sense of unity and identity" to the Myanmar people.⁹⁷ She also argues that the construction of gender relations, nationalisation, and militarisation are key and that "the military is always a patriarchy."⁹⁸ This contributes to the subjugation of women in Myanmar's gender hierarchy, as identified by Myanmar academic Chie Ikeya and outlined in the Introduction.⁹⁹

In Myanmar, Buddhism is inextricably part of the dominant political culture. Buddhism has a long and complicated role in Myanmar's popular culture, contributing to the dominance of the identity of the Bamar Buddhist man, and the subjugation of other ethnicities and women. The new generation engaged with this masculine identity and existing gender hierarchies. Some members of the new generation pioneered alternatives to this Buddhist gender hierarchy, including the ascension of some non-Bamar ethnic people as elite and the ways that elite young women engaged with discourses that dictated the roles and opportunities available to them. As explored in Chapter 4, some young women tried to change these restrictive discourses, including the confrontationally promiscuous model, the internationally engaged beauty queen, and the revolutionary feminist. The ways that minority ethnic groups began to enter the elite sphere are

⁹⁶ Walton, "Buddhism, Politics, and Political Change," 127.

⁹⁷ Annabelle Droulers, "Meet the Burmese women tackling tradition and taboo," *Democratic Voice of Burma*, January 25, 2016, <http://www.dvb.no/analysis/burmese-feminists-tackle-tradition-and-taboo/60452>.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ Ikeya, "The 'Traditional' High Status of Women in Burma."

explored throughout the thesis, but most explicitly through the underground rappers of Chapter 5.

Conclusion

This Chapter has established the conceptual and historical cornerstones necessary to answer the thesis' research question: what was the role of elite young people in mediating social and economic change into elite composition and practice in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016. To answer this question – and related questions of how certain elite qualities and values become dominant in a society, how those who embody them come to do so, and what effect generational change has on the conception of elite – a social generational approach is useful for considering young people as actors in a process of change.

Further, combining the social generational approach with elite theory allows an analysis that highlights elite young people as key actors in generational change. There is a tension between how social change can result in a new generation that overhauls social systems, and the way elite qualities can be inherited across generations. Pointing to that tension through the Myanmar case study, this thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by establishing how these two processes, generational change and elite inheritance, can coincide in moments of social and economic change.

The creation of a new generation does not entirely erase existing ways of living and thinking. The various ways the new generation engaged with the political culture of Myanmar is indicated in the organisation of the five social groups along a continuum according to their relationship to change: from those most resistant to change to those who embraced it most. The relationships of the five social groups to Myanmar's political culture is further indicated by the level and type of scrutiny and judgement that they faced.

The type of elite capital that provided young people with elite entrée is used to categorise them into the five social groups. By doing so, it is possible to identify some of the ways they interacted with Myanmar political culture, including the dominant legacy capital and the gender roles. The Yakuza, analysed in Chapter 2, inherited the legacies of Myanmar's political culture of military dominance and the image of the privileged Bamar Buddhist man and they were resistant to change. The cronies, in Chapter 3, represented a new era of Myanmar's elite business dynasties as they worked to reduce their families' reliance on state patronage as cronies. Young women, analysed in Chapter 4, challenged gender inequality perpetuated by Buddhism through efforts to achieve a greater degree of independence from young men and their families, but they were still largely confined by a persistent and unequal gender hierarchy in 2016. These threshold social groups point to the continuity of certain qualities through generational change in Myanmar.

The final two social groups demonstrated less continuity and more conscious attempts to change elite values, and introduce new systems and cultures into Myanmar. The underground rappers were elite outliers – without financial capital or legacies of privilege – and they negotiated generational change for the wider population, who rewarded them with cultural capital and elite status, as analysed in Chapter 5. They were subject to ongoing censorship and community scrutiny as their lifestyle choices pushed at Myanmar's cultural boundaries. The creatives, of Chapter 6, broke most completely with the political culture of military rule and fear, imagining and creating a utopian future of new Myanmar cultures and lifestyles. Some of the creatives were openly gay men, which challenged the heteronormativity of Myanmar society. Unseating the political culture strengthened through over a half-century of military rule will likely take decades. However, elite young people were influential founding members of a new generation

during this period, and they began a process reevaluating the elite qualities of Myanmar society.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Egretau, "Myanmar: Transition, Praetorian Politics," 423.

Chapter 2

The Yakuza

While “Yakuza” usually refers to the powerful Japanese criminal organisation that goes by the name, it was used by some Myanmar people to refer to those who might otherwise be described as gangsters.¹ The sons of Myanmar’s old elite families were often described as Yakuza: they were well connected to influential and potentially corrupt individuals from the decades of military rule, and they often appeared involved in criminal activities. They protected their legacies, often had relatives who were former or serving military leaders, and resisted certain social changes, through postural violence designed to assert their command over Myanmar. As the sons of the old elite, they inherited legacies of Myanmar’s decades of military rule and they were resistant to changes that threatened those legacies. As a threshold group of the new generation, these young men represented some of the continuity aspects of generational change. While young women also inherited these familial legacies, it was overwhelmingly young men who violently defended and attempted to control the speed and direction of change

¹ Yangon’s most notorious gang, the Scorpions, was established in the 1990s, allegedly by a young Myanmar man who had connections to the Japanese Yakuza from his time living there. The Scorpion gang comprised young men from elite Myanmar families, including, according to rumour, Kyaw Ne Win, the grandson of first dictator Ne Win. A few young men took apparent delight in telling the author their fathers, uncles, or brothers had been members of the Scorpion gang. Many members of the Scorpion gang were released in 2011, see Wai Moe, “The Scorpions are Back,” *The Irrawaddy*, August 18, 2011, http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=21917; Nyo Me, “Blunting the Scorpion’s Stinger,” *The Myanmar Times*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/blunting-scorpions-stinger.html>.

during this period. The daughters of the old elite are analysed in Chapter 4, alongside other elite young women.

The members of the Yakuza social group conformed to a hegemonic form of masculinity on nights out in Yangon.² When exhibiting this masculinity, they deployed violent retribution to perceived threats and acted in accordance with carefully constructed identities.³ Prior to 2010, these young men had fought one another. After 2010, these young men were forced to ratchet up their violence as increasing numbers of young people joined them in the nightscape and threatened their dominance. In response to the increased presence of members of other social groups of the new generation in bars, clubs, and other venues around Yangon the young gangsters seemed to be resisting desperately, and dangerously for onlookers, the increasingly inevitable changes to elite composition and practice in Myanmar.

Immersive, qualitative social insights from fieldwork in November and December 2012 provide accounts of how the gangsters responded to social and economic changes. The analysis of these insights also expands on the values and limitations of this study: they highlight the bizarre and unprecedented access gained to these young men, and the difficulties that arose from researching a group that had not hitherto been the subject of research. This Chapter presents a mixture of qualitative social insights, analysis of these insights that draws on similar research in other countries, and offers some tentative inferences about broader changes to elite composition and practice during this period.

Over a period of almost two months, the author was immersed in one friendship group of gangsters, headed by the son of a senior military commander, Myat Tun. Myat Tun

² R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005).

³ Henrietta Moore, *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 69.

was the undisputed leader of the group, by virtue of having the most distinguished lineage and easy access to disposable income. Myat Tun was authoritative, assumed the role of decision maker, paid almost all of the group's expenses, and usually provided a fleet of cars. The group included young men who had been friends since childhood, with numbers fluctuating between five and ten young men, depending on who was in Yangon, Naypyidaw,⁴ or Singapore at the time.

By 2015, members of the other social groups of the new generation outnumbered the gangsters in bars and clubs around Yangon. These other social groups had created alternative elite spaces and brought new elite practices to the urban nightlife, in which the gangsters were not in control or even recognised. Their fall from grace was all but confirmed by 2016, when, while they continued to command enviable financial capital, their privileged legacies had been rendered outdated. The illusory world of the gangsters was all but destroyed. The increasingly confident population expressed disdain publicly towards these previously untouchable elite young people. Their role in resisting changes to Myanmar's elite composition earned them their position as a threshold group of the new generation in Myanmar. Some evocative scenes from fieldwork with these young men are described in this Chapter, vividly recalling the early years of Myanmar's new generation between 2010 and 2012.

Postural violence

In November 2012, with smoke curling up from smouldering cigarettes in an overflowing ashtray, Myat Tun grabbed a bottle of Johnny Walker black label whiskey. He looked furious as he picked it up, swung it behind his head, and went to launch it at a young man who was profusely apologising and trying to flee. A security guard restrained

⁴ Naypyidaw is the new administrative capital of Myanmar, established in 2005 by the military junta.

Myat Tun, grabbing the bottle and saving the other young man from grievous harm. The reason? The young man had accidentally bumped into the author as he struggled to move past the table in the crowded nightclub. The intensity of the violence was shocking and the speed of escalation continued to be a surprise, despite having come to expect it after spending a few weeks with these young men. Time with Myat Tun and his friends was spent anxiously waiting for the next outburst, which was never long coming. Myat Tun and his friends engaged in frequent displays of postural violence in the nightscape of Yangon.⁵ They acted as though they had inherited the right to mete out violence from their parents and grandparents who were former military leaders.

The gangsters' grandiose threats and violence drew on Myanmar's violent history of military rule. To understand the way memories of historical violence can be animated through acts of violence, Allen Feldman's work tracing the "cultural construction of violence, body and history" in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1986 is instructive.⁶ Feldman believes that in countries with histories of violence, such as Northern Ireland, "violent acts on the body constituted a material vehicle for constructing memory and embedding the self in social and institutional memory."⁷ That is, violence draws on and reminds a "community of witnesses" of their history.⁸ Feldman argues that cultural and social memory is intentionally "mediated by social actors and... embodied in performance practices that can intervene in the meaning systems of the present."⁹

Violence can be performative as revenge, retaliation or punishment and can be used as a reminder and a reinforcement of the people's "political subjecthood."¹⁰ Feldman calls

⁵ Chatterton and Hollands, *Urban Nightscapes: Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces, and Corporate Power*.

⁶ Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1991), 1.

⁷ Allen Feldman, "Political Terror and the Technologies of Memory: Excuse, Sacrifice, Commodification, and Actuarial Moralities," *Radical History Review* 85 (2003), 60.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 63.

violence a “materialised narrative act” that “has become the premier, though hotly contested, medium for inscribing social memory onto the political landscape.”¹¹ In such a way, in countries with histories of violence, violence can be used as performance during times of relative peace to remind the population of their history. After 2010, the gangsters worked to remind the population of their dominance. The new threats and ways that they responded could indicate that the social memory of that history was becoming less poignant, replaced by the atmosphere of hope and democracy that pervaded Myanmar after 2010.

Whatever the underlying reason, it began to be apparent that the gangsters increasingly felt that their identities were under threat.¹² These young men were the notorious “spoilt brats” and “playboys” of the nightlife scene in Yangon. These playboys had effectively constructed and fuelled the nightscape of Yangon for decades. They laid the groundwork that the proliferation of new bars and nightclubs built on after 2010.¹³ While new bars and nightclubs sprung up around them, these young men’s habits did not change substantially. The sons of the country’s elite had grown accustomed to enjoying the money, connections, and leisure time to create the nightscape of Yangon since the early 2000s. However, after 2010 the urban nightlife of Yangon was invaded by new young people, including young women, at the greater array of bars and nightclubs. Other young people were able to afford some of the privileges that had previously only been accessible by the gangsters. These newcomers engaged in some of the elite practices that the gangsters had been enjoying since the early 2000s. The gangsters did not welcome the newcomers, who they felt were encroaching on their control of Yangon.

¹¹ *ibid*, 66, 63.

¹² Moore, *A Passion for Difference*, 55.

¹³ Wai Moe, “Than Shwe’s Grandson: Geek, Playboy or gangster?” *The Irrawaddy*, September 23, 2009, http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=16843.

The sons and grandsons of Myanmar's old elite were born into a society heavy with the legacy of military rule, the memory of which these young men drew on to assert their dominance. In 2010, Myanmar's old elites were well established and well insulated from prying eyes, living as they did under the world's longest reigning military dictatorship.¹⁴ The relationship between the military and the state in Myanmar continues to be the subject of much uncertainty. Following 2010, the military state has been, at various times and by various commentators, considered a "diminished authoritarian regime,"¹⁵ "electoral authoritarianism,"¹⁶ "praetorian transition,"¹⁷ "defective' democracy,"¹⁸ "quasi-military rule,"¹⁹ "constitutional rule,"²⁰ "anocracy,"²¹ and a "quasi-civilian government."²² As these titles reflect, Myanmar politics is the subject of much disagreement and confusion, but what remains consistent across these labels is a degree of agreement that the state continued to be subject to some level of military influence after 2010. The military had led the country for decades by commanding violence and creating an atmosphere of fear and mistrust among the citizens of Myanmar. From 2010 to 2012, the

¹⁴ Some academics have inferred or speculated about these leaders' motivations and thinking, and rumours of their characteristics and peculiarities abound. For a summation of some of their rumoured peculiarities, see Andrew Selth, "Even Paranoids Have Enemies: Cyclone Nargis and Myanmar's Fears of Invasion," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2008).

¹⁵ Roger Lee Huang, "Re-thinking Myanmar's Political Regime: Military Rule in Myanmar and Implications for Current Reforms," *Contemporary Politics* 19 (2013), 258.

¹⁶ Nicholas Farrelly, "Beyond Electoral Authoritarianism in Transitional Myanmar," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 12 (2015); Adam P. Macdonald, "From Military Rule to Electoral Authoritarianism: The Reconfiguration of Power in Myanmar and its Future," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 40, no. 1 (2013).

¹⁷ Renaud Egreteau, "Patterns of Military Behavior in Myanmar's New Legislature," *Asia-Pacific Bulletin: East-West Center*, 233 (2013), 1-2.

¹⁸ Paul Chambers, "Constitutional Change and Security Forces in Southeast Asia: Lessons from Thailand and Myanmar," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36, no. 1 (2014).

¹⁹ Marco Bunte, "Burma's Transition to Quasi-Military Rule: From Rulers to Guardians?" *Armed Forces & Society* 40, no. 4 (2014).

²⁰ Robert Taylor, "Myanmar: From Army Rule to Constitutional Rule," *Asian Affairs* 43, no. 2 (2012).

²¹ Kristine Eck, "Repression by Proxy: How Military Purges and Insurgency Impact the Delegation of Coercion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015).

²² Aurel Croissant and Jil Kamerling, "Why Do Military Regimes Institutionalize? Constitution-making and Elections as Political Survival Strategy in Myanmar," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 2 (2013).

gangsters leveraged the military's historical control in an effort to enshrine their own legal impunity, financial gains, and political dominance as necessary acts of state.²³

In addition to inheriting their elite status, the gangsters also inherited the mechanisms of performative and retaliatory violence from their parents.²⁴ While the history of Myanmar is replete with propaganda exalting the nationalist glory of the *Tatmadaw*,²⁵ the individual military leaders were notoriously secretive.²⁶ Aside from some details and biographies of the first dictator, Ne Win,²⁷ and the second dictator, Than Shwe,²⁸ little is known about the elite military leaders' personal lives. While the specifics of the old elite's political calculus has been primarily the subject of speculation, their dominance of Myanmar is well established as based on violence and propaganda extolling their necessity to the country's security.

After 2010, the gangsters' perception of mounting social changes mirrored that of their parents and the political transition more broadly: they sat uncomfortably on a spectrum between the two extremes of the progressive and the resistant. The progressives were more accepting of changes to elite composition and practice, and worked to create a role for themselves in the shaping of contemporary Myanmar.²⁹ Former Myanmar army general and number three in the military leadership, Thein Sein, was President. He headed the progressive faction of the military, and led Myanmar through the first cycle of

²³ As Mary Callahan describes the history of Myanmar politics as "puzzling and unpredictable," something of an "almanac of enigma" in "Burma in 1995: Looking Beyond the Release of Aung San Suu Kyi," *Asian Survey* 36, no. 2 (1996), 158.

²⁴ In 2006, junta leader Senior General Than Shwe's daughter's wedding was estimated to have cost US\$300,000. A exiled Myanmar magazine editor, Aung Zaw, said of the wedding: "such mindless indulgence... is an affront to the millions of Burmese suffering under the incompetence and brutality" of the military leaders. Jonathan Watts, "Burmese Outraged at Lavish Junta Wedding," *The Guardian*, November 3, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/nov/02/burma.jonathanwatts>.

²⁵ Mary Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003); Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2002).

²⁶ Peter Perry, *Myanmar (Burma) Since 1962: The Failure of Development* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 13-20.

²⁷ Robert Taylor, *Ne Win: A Political Biography* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015).

²⁸ Benedict Rogers, *Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma's Tyrant* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010).

²⁹ Min Zin and Brian Joseph, "The Democrats' Opportunity," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012).

the National Legislature from 2011-2016 before the transition of control to the civilian NLD government led by democracy icon, Aung San Suu Kyi, following the November 2015 elections. The stalwarts of the military era did not embrace change, instead resisting what they perceived as threats to their dominance and to Myanmar itself.³⁰ After 2010, the progressive faction was seemingly ascendant on the political stage, while the resistant remained aloof from the political sphere. For the most part, the gangsters who were performing their identity work in the nightscape of Yangon were from the resistant side of the divide. Progressive young men were less likely to be seen at nightclubs, suggesting these scenes were not the integral and habitual basis to their personal identity formation that it was for the resistant young men.

The gangsters engaged in power struggles that reflected longstanding factions in the military predating 2010. Kyaw Yin Hlaing offers one of the only explorations of these power and factional struggles within the military – the void of information all the more suggestive of the country’s isolation given Kyaw Ying Hlaing says that such struggles have been “present in almost all post-independence governments.”³¹ After 1988, the government focused on the economic development of the country, improving foreign relations, and creating national unity. Myanmar institutionalised “the most durable military rule in the post-war world” and an “exceptionally authoritarian, military-dominated political system.”³²

The gangsters inherited the military’s unyielding independence from civilian oversight and control of the country. Growing up, the gangsters were assured of their own importance and became a clique of precocious and entitled young men. These young

³⁰ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, “Power and Factional Struggles,” 176.

³¹ Kyaw Yin Hlaing attributes the relative stability or instability of the state at the mercy of these factional struggles to the presence of a “hegemon that is able to mediate between factions while not relying on them in turn for his own influence and authority,” in “Power and Factional Struggles,” 176.

³² Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 413.

men brazenly flouted the law and displayed their status and wealth by racing sports cars through police checkpoints, consuming illegal drugs, and spending exorbitant amounts of money and time on partying and leisure. The gangsters used mechanisms of performative violence to remind the population of their violent history in an attempt to maintain the elite composition and practices that predated 2010. An analysis of their behaviour in the nightscape of Yangon establishes how they attempted to control Myanmar's transformation in ways that did not undermine their masculinity and power through violence and a disregard for law enforcement. By 2016, their inability to resist changes to elite composition and practice was revealed in their loss of control of the nightscape of Yangon.

The nightscape of Yangon

The gangsters' habits and practices may appear trivial and superficial, centred as they were on drinking and partying, but they can also be analysed to reveal deeply personal rituals and a process of cultural change.³³ Their socialisation rituals were replete with symbols of their elite qualities, including group makeup, nightly routine, alcohol preference, car selection, and clothing choice.³⁴ Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands describe their "nightscape" concept as a kind of landscape of the urban nightlife, which these young men can be seen to have created prior to 2010. A nightscape is made, remade, and unmade by young people engaging in the production, consumption, and regulation of youth culture in urban nightlife areas.³⁵ Prior to 2010, the gangsters enjoyed complete autonomy over the making of the nightscape in Yangon. Their public

³³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002), 141.

³⁴ Erving Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 2013), 21.

³⁵ Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands, *Urban Nightscapes: Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces, and Corporate Power* (London: Routledge, 2003).

appearances in the nightscape were carefully choreographed “dramatization[s] of status concerns.”³⁶ From 2010 to the end of 2012, the gangsters revelled in their continued dominance of the nightscape they had made. By the end of 2012, however, other social groups of the new generation were increasingly challenging that dominance. By 2016, a gradual process of remaking Yangon’s nightscape resulted in a nightscape that was almost unrecognisable from that the gangsters had created.

In the face of an increased audience and challenges to their status, the gangsters violently defended their control of Yangon’s nightscape in late 2012. The ways that they engaged with others during their nightly rituals reflected their uneasy relationship with change. By going out they were participating in expanded leisure opportunities and consuming foreign goods, but they were also using the nightscape as a prime staging ground for asserting their dominance in response to new threats. Young men followed strictly drawn gender lines and hegemonic masculinity was a central characteristic of their performances, as explored through the following account of the nightscape as experienced by Myat Tun and his friends.

During the day, which generally began around 2 pm when everyone had slept off the night before, a message from Myat Tun would be sent to the others: the plan for that night. The evening began at 8 pm when some young men gathered at one of Myat Tun’s houses. Myat Tun walked out of his house and chose which cars he wanted to drive that evening, collecting the keys from a household staff member who spent his days cleaning and watching the cars in the blazing sun. He tossed one set of keys to his closet friend, Maung Zaw, and told him to go pick up some marijuana. He tossed another set to another young man and told him to go pick up their other friends and meet at one of his favourite bars, Sportsbar (see Map 2). The group followed his instructions and sped out

³⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 437.

of the driveway. In a two-door Nissan Fairlady sports car Myat Tun sped around the streets for almost an hour, talking to the author and listening to music. Finally, Myat Tun received a message that the others had finished their tasks and were on their way to Sportsbar. On arrival at Sportsbar, Myat Tun and his friends were escorted by wait staff to a reserved table, where bottles of liquor, cans of mixers, and buckets of ice were promptly wheeled over by wait staff who immediately began pouring drinks.

Myat Tun had a few young men he seemed to keep around for comedic value, either as jokers or as weaklings to ridicule. They heckled one another about various things, but always in deference to Myat Tun. Occasionally, amongst the revelry, Myat Tun would pull one young man aside to either give him a task or have a secret serious conversation. About these, Maung Zaw once said cryptically that Myat Tun, “has many secrets and has to do a lot for his family.”³⁷ Once Myat Tun was away for a few days and on his return, he said he had to drive to Naypyidaw to deliver something for his father, but would not be drawn to provide further details. On another occasion, he said he was preparing to take over his father’s work and care for his family. Myat Tun seemed to revel in the aura of mystery that surrounded him and would often sit composed and silent as the drunken revelry and disorder swelled around him: enjoying the product of his careful curation.

At around 11 pm after the group was suitably lubricated and fed, Myat Tun announced it was time to go to a nightclub. The group got back into the cars and sped off towards the nightclub. The young men drove at speeds up to 150km/hr and raced other sports cars along the way. All the young men drank heavily and gave little or no consideration to staying sober or driving safely. Almost all the young men on the roads late at night were

³⁷ Fielwork notes, November 2012.

drunk, including other elite young men and taxi drivers.³⁸ After an adrenaline-charged drive, the young men arrived at a nightclub.³⁹ Myat Tun and his group turned off the road and passed under a crumbling brick archway to enter a dirt carpark outside an austere concrete building on the grounds of the Yangon International Hotel complex. One of the first hotels built in Yangon in the 1990s, the Yangon International Hotel complex was a military joint-venture. Pioneer Nightclub was housed in a separate single storey, dank old building to the side of the hotel (see Map 2).⁴⁰ The windows were all blacked out with mirrored glass, and from the outside it looked like an abandoned building or a workman's shack attached to the hotel.

The carpark and building belied its true purpose and interior, however, as ostentatious sports cars roared in the driveway, and security guards stood with arms crossed in every direction. Young women tottered around on high heels in tight short dresses, and young men swarmed the entrance smoking cigarettes and vying for entry. Myat Tun drove through the crowd straight to the front of the club where a parking attendant rushed to direct him into a reserved car space. Once parked, Myat Tun reached behind the passenger seat and pulled a wad of Myanmar *kyat*⁴¹ from a hessian sack bulging with money. He handed a stack of notes to the parking attendant; a reserved parking space cost around 50,000 kyats (US\$50) per night in late 2012.⁴² He put more wads of notes

³⁸ Hans Hulst, "The Alcohol Curse," *Frontier Myanmar*, January 18, 2016, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-alcohol-curse>; Hans Hulst, "Conquering the Road Safety Challenge," *Frontier Myanmar*, October 6, 2016, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/conquering-the-road-safety-challenge>.

³⁹ Pioneer Nightclub at Yangon International Hotel, DJ Bar at Inya Lake Hotel, or Café Liberal are other popular choices for young military men, though Myat Tun said Pioneer was his favourite.

⁴⁰ It was rumoured by local young people that, as the name suggests, Pioneer was the first nightclub established in Yangon. Rumours were that it was opened by Ne Win's notorious grandsons, though it was difficult to verify its ownership.

⁴¹ Myanmar *kyat* is the local currency, at the time the conversion was approximately US\$1 to 1000 kyat.

⁴² There was no minimum wage in 2012, but in 2015 the Government set a minimum wage of 3600 kyat for an eight-hour work day, or approximately US\$67 a month at 2015 exchange rates. Timothy McLaughlin and Aung Hla Tun, "Myanmar sets \$2.80 daily minimum wage in bid to boost investment," *Reuters*, August 29, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-economy-wages/myanmar-sets-2-80-daily-minimum-wage-in-bid-to-boost-investment-idUSKCN0QY0A620150829>.

into a clutch bag. He did not carry a wallet as it would not fit the number of notes he needed to carry to pay for an evening in Pioneer, upwards of US\$500 a night.⁴³ By this point, his friends had parked their cars in unreserved car spaces further from the front door and were waiting by the entrance for Myat Tun. The group was whisked past the queue of people, the mirrored glass doors were slid open, and they descended into the world inside.⁴⁴ Myat Tun led his friends into the club, handed out money to all the staff he passed, and listed off his demands to staff and security guards as he walked through the nightclub. His instructions were quickly carried out and by the time he arrived at his reserved table, bottles of liquor were waiting and staff arrived with the drinks, snacks, and cigarettes that he had ordered. Everyone crowded around the table, lit cigarettes, and collected their glasses of alcohol. Myat Tun led the first cheers of the night and everyone downed their drinks. The young men stayed in Pioneer until around 2 am, drinking heavily, dancing, smoking, flirting, posturing, and fighting.

Since the young men arrived in Pioneer, they had a detail of security guards. A security detail was allocated according to the importance of the patrons and through a risk assessment about the threat a particular group posed to other patrons. Groups of elite young men who were known to constantly instigate fights were surrounded by security guards to maintain general calm and limit violence in clubs. If a group of young men was known to start fights, nightclubs would assign them a security detail to restrain them from throwing bottles and fighting, rather than trying to ban them from the clubs.

Banning was realistically impossible since many clubs were rumoured to be either owned

⁴³ At the time, the largest kyat note available was a 5,000 denomination, however, 1,000 kyat notes remained the most prevalent. Myat Tun seemed to prefer to pay with the 1,000 denominations in nightclubs, as it gave the appearance that he was constantly counting out great sums of money, and allowed him to hand over wads of notes to pay bills and tip wait staff and security guards. There were no credit card facilities in nightclubs or bars at the time (although they were beginning to be introduced in some of the newer bars, with high surcharges and fees attached).

⁴⁴ There were entrance fees at Pioneer and other nightclubs set deliberately out of the reach of voyeurs or more miserly patrons who rarely bought enough bottles of spirits to justify provision of the spectacle.

by, connected to, or reliant on the patronage of the military and old elites.⁴⁵ In nightclubs, the majority of fights were the result of perceived slights regarding young women. The gangsters were almost always accompanied in bars and nightclubs by young women, be they girlfriends, friends, or sexual partners. If anyone bumped into, looked at, or spoke to one of these young women in a manner that the young men interpreted as an attempt to flirt with them, the dominant young man of the group would immediately incite violence. Their recourse to violence was abrupt and intense, often lashing out with punches or grabbing for glasses and bottles to throw. The security guards who were assigned to restrain the young men would jump into action in response to these outbursts. While officially the clubs claimed that anyone fighting would be removed and blacklisted, this did not apply to elite military men. Instead of removing the gangsters, the security guards would remove the patrons who had offended them.

The gangsters' ability to disregard rules and command the nightscape of Yangon indicated the continuance of military capital from 2010 to the end of 2012. Myat Tun continued to roll around Yangon, making grand entrances into bars and clubs, and having his orders obeyed. After 2012, the cronies and the creative opened new restaurants, bars, and clubs, and the underground rappers performed live music and concerts around Yangon. Escape Gastro Bar, Port Autonomy, and The Clubhouse were new popular venues in the nightscape (see Map 2). Café Liberal and GTR underwent renovations, updating their fit outs and curating a fresh new musical calendar, including DJs from South Korea, Australia, and Thailand. In contrast, Pioneer, DJ Bar, and Sportsbar failed to move with the new generation and were increasingly rendered outdated remnants of a nightscape that had lost its lustre. The gangsters also acted as remnants of

⁴⁵ The Inya Lake Hotel complex, which housed several nightclubs (including GTR and DJ Bar) was previously military land. It was unclear if and how it was sold to a private owner. The land around Kandawgyi Lake (housing Café Liberal) and Yangon International Hotel Complex (housing Pioneer) had similarly opaque military ties.

an outdated nightscape, continuing to frequent Pioneer, DJ Bar, and Sportsbar. The gangsters' appetite for changing their elite practices seemed restricted to minor trends that could be incorporated into their existing nightscape. For example, shisha pipes were a trend that took off in Yangon around 2012, and the gangsters happily ordered the shisha pipes when Sportsbar added them to its menu. Similarly, they seemed to enjoy having more young women around at night, as it meant more potential casual sexual encounters. However, their tolerance for young women joining in their nightscape did not extend to their girlfriends, wives, or sisters. That their girlfriends, wives, and sisters may start going out more was perceived as a potential threat to their freedom and command of the nightscape of Yangon.

New threats and unpredictable violence

The gangsters lashed out violently at the other social groups of the new generation who threatened their control and began to remake the nightscape around them. Reports of elite young men fighting prior to 2010 indicate a history of violence in the nightscape.⁴⁶ However, in 2012 the dynamics observed during fieldwork seemed to be different to those reported prior to 2010. Prior to 2010, violence was reportedly more gang-based or premeditated between two antagonistic parties.⁴⁷ For example, two different groups would arrange to meet at a location and fight. In 2012, the violence witnessed seemed to be less calculated and increasingly directed at parties who were not co-aggressors.⁴⁸ For example, the gangsters would lash out at an unsuspecting young man who they perceived to be flirting with "their" young women. After 2012, threats were quickly and harshly neutralised, whether they were physical or symbolic, real or perceived, serious or minor.

⁴⁶ Wai Moe, "The Scorpions are Back."

⁴⁷ Fieldwork notes, November 2012, March 2013 and November 2014.

⁴⁸ Feldman, "Political Terror and the Technologies of Memory."

Analysing two instances when the gangsters felt their power was challenged by other elite young men highlights the difference between how these young men responded to challenges from other members of their social group versus how they responded to challenges from members of other social groups. The latter type of threat, and the ensuing violent response, seemed to be a new occurrence since 2010. In some ways, the gangsters appeared to be united against a common enemy during this period, and instances of intra-group fighting were less explosive and volatile, as the following two descriptions demonstrate.

One evening at GTR nightclub in Yangon, two groups of gangsters had an altercation over a young woman. The young woman, Khaing, was the girlfriend of a young man, Aung. Myat Tun was a high school friend of Khaing, and Aung was outraged that Myat Tun had been apparently talking to his girlfriend on the phone and on Facebook. It was unclear if Aung had come to GTR with the sole intention of confronting Myat Tun, or if it was a coincidence that the two groups were both at the nightclub. Khaing made her way over to greet Myat Tun when he arrived and caused drama by doing so. Aung and his group of friends proceeded to charge at Myat Tun and his friends, who were in the elevated VIP area of the club. A tense standoff ensued for almost an hour, with security guards standing between Myat Tun and his friends in the VIP area, and Aung and his group in the general admission area two steps down. The tension did not seem to bother Myat Tun, who continued to act normally, pouring drinks and pretending to be unaware of the group of angry young men trying to fight him metres away. He would occasionally be goaded into approaching them and would stand behind the security guards and glare at them defiantly. After around an hour of this standoff, and seemingly to the relief of the security guards, Myat Tun and his friends decided it was time to move this fight to the docks and the group headed for their cars.

Once outside, everyone was on their phones and jumping in cars while Khaing, under the pretence of defusing the situation, continued to fuel the drama by following Myat Tun. One young man said they were taking the fight to the docks, menacingly saying “do not worry, we have back up coming and will be ready.”⁴⁹ Aung and his group were not present in the car park during this period, possibly held inside or escorted to their cars by security. Khaing waited behind in the carpark as Myat Tun and his group pulled out, and she was seen in the rear-view mirror climbing into the passenger seat of a car. She was later seen in the passenger seat of Aung’s car when he and his friends caught up to Myat Tun. Myat Tun’s friends drove in a formation around Myat Tun’s car. This seemed to be both to protect him and to make a show of preventing him from racing Aung. At one point Myat Tun made a show of recklessness when he broke from the formation to race Aung: his apparently uncontrollable masculinity and power unable to be kept in check by his friends. He raced alongside Aung until they reached a checkpoint and Aung conservatively decided to follow the law and slowed down. By comparison, Myat Tun displayed his disregard for the law and his notoriety to police by choosing to speed around the checkpoint, pulling into oncoming traffic, and racing off into the night.

The aggression and tension that had been present in GTR and in the carpark had almost completely disappeared by the time Myat Tun and his friends reached the docks. Aung and his group never arrived, and Myat Tun and his group spent the remainder of the early morning sitting around listening to music and drinking. The scene was eerily calm with everyone pretending they were not worried: that Aung must have been scared off and wisely chosen to forfeit the fight. Yet, with each new set of headlights that approached everyone bristled a little, betraying that they were still on alert. It seemed that either common sense had prevailed, possibly with Aung’s realisation that Myat Tun had

⁴⁹ Fieldwork notes, November 2012.

significantly more people in his group, many of whom had arrived outside GTR in cars with unknown weaponry in their trunks. Aung reportedly called and apologised to Myat Tun the next day, saying he was wrong to think Myat Tun had acted inappropriately with Khaing, but the animosity between the groups was never completely forgotten.

The fight between these two groups of gangsters seemed to be relatively routine: the way the fight had escalated, the involvement of the security guards, the mutual understanding of where the fight would progress, the calm detachment of conversations while racing, and then the way it all ended after the groups were away from public scrutiny. By the next day Myat Tun, while certainly not friends with Aung, was calm enough to take a phone call from Aung and accept his apology. The fight was a mere jostling for position in a relatively well-established hierarchy of the gangsters. This was a symbolic fight that was won without any physical contact. Occasional assertions of power and reminders of a group's dominance were necessary to maintain various hierarchies. In this instance, violence was never actualised and posturing was enough to reaffirm the group's dominance. Fights with other gangsters were a reminder that while wider social changes threatened this type of young man during this period, they also continued to face internal power struggles similar to the dynamics of the military junta.

In another instance, a new kind of violence highlights some changes to the way the gangsters operated during this period. Unlike the fight described above, incursions from different social groups or newcomers into what the gangsters perceived as their nightscape seemed to be far less routine, and the outcomes considerably more unpredictable and explosive. Around 11 pm one evening, a gangster, Thein Tun, was in DJ Bar with two friends, when someone bumped into him while walking past. Thein Tun accused the young man, Myo Myint, who had bumped into him of trying to provoke him to fight. Myo Myint was with around ten friends, who were relatively average DJ Bar

patrons for 2012: they were not obscenely wealthy or connected but would save up enough money to go out occasionally. Myo Myint apologised and said it had been an accident. Thein Tun did not appear to be satisfied with this explanation but realised that Myo Myint's group significantly outnumbered he and his two friends. They provoked Myo Myint and his friends to follow them out into the carpark, where they jumped into their cars and the fight seemed to be over. However, seemingly incensed that he had been forced to retreat by someone of lesser status than himself, Thein Tun proceeded to plough his car into Myo Myint, his friends, security guards, and other people standing outside DJ Bar, before speeding out of the carpark. After the incident, which left several people in the hospital, DJ Bar was closed for almost three months. It was rumoured that Thein Tun had fled to Singapore and never faced charges for the brutal attack.

The slightest offence perceived by a gangster from a member of a different social group could result in unpredictable outcomes and serious bodily harm. The gangsters did not seem to know how to respond to this new kind of challenge or threat, and they expressed outrage commiserate to their apparent disdain for what they saw as lesser young people invading their nightscape. While these GTR and the DJ Bar fights were standout examples of the kinds of fighting and violence that occurred in Yangon, the motives and intent behind them were commonplace on nights out from 2010 through to 2016. Every evening held a high risk of violence and the gangsters often seemed to be searching for reasons to be offended and for people to blame for their diminished control and status.

The new threat presented by other social groups, who were remaking the nightscape that the gangsters had previously made and enjoyed, was met with unpredictable violence. The gangsters' pre-existing violent temperaments and established mechanisms of performative violence were drawn on in their reactions to new sparring partners and a

larger audience. New segments of Myanmar society who were increasingly able to afford to go to nightclubs became the subjects of desperate and brutal fights that seemed to symbolise the gangsters' impending loss of control and redundancy of their elite qualities in Myanmar.⁵⁰ These fights symbolised a grander struggle underway for command over who had the power to control the new generation and Myanmar society.⁵¹ By 2016, the gangsters had lost the fight, and the other social groups, most notably the cronies and the creatives had remade the nightscape to reflect their conceptions of urban nightlife.

Disregarding law enforcement

Enabling the gangsters' violent outbursts was law enforcement's continued inability to curtail their behaviour. The key perpetrators' legal impunity undermined police checkpoints and bans on sports cars. If violent outbursts resulted in legal proceedings, the courts' lack of autonomy and inability to arbitrate freely insulated these young men from facing the consequences of their behaviour. After 2012, law enforcement did signal their intention to try and crack down on street races by banning sports cars. They set up police checkpoints and allegedly empowered police to detain drivers and impound sports cars.⁵² The campaign had limited effect, only forcing some less well connected young men to be more careful about when and where they drove their sports cars. For the gangsters, the threat of police intervention was virtually non-existent, and they did not change their behaviour or face any reprimand during this period. Instead of being

⁵⁰ Nicholas Farrelly, "Myanmar's Middle-Class Bulge," *The Myanmar Times*, July 27, 2015, <https://www.mmmtimes.com/opinion/15675-myanmar-s-middle-class-bulge.html>.

⁵¹ The battle for dominance during this period was reminiscent of Bangkok and some Thai provincial centres in the late 1980's and 1990's, see Rudiger Korff, "Who has power in Bangkok?" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 10 (1986).

⁵² Htoo Aung, "Yangon Police Step in to Stop Illegal Races," *The Myanmar Times*, November 19, 2012, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/yangon/3168-police-step-in-to-stop-illegal-races.html>.

discouraged or impeded by these efforts, the gangsters appropriated them into their displays of privilege and power.

The gangsters performed car racing with the same sense of entitlement and privilege as their performances in bars and nightclubs: replete with symbols of their elite values.⁵³ As with other symbols of wealth that Myat Tun and the gangsters displayed, their cars were widely recognised as expensive, jarred against their impoverished surrounds, and driven aggressively. They had a clear preference for Asian sports cars, favouring the Nissan Skyline GTR and Fairlady models. During the day they would make more practical choices, such as Toyota Landcruisers, which were more suited to the pot-hole riddled road conditions. Changing vehicles also clearly demarcated the day from the night, adding to the total experience of the nightscape for these young men. While pot-holes obviously continued to exist at night, practical considerations were bracketed off and forgotten. Instead of practicalities, the nightscape was a symbolic territory that required aggressive sports cars that clashed with their surroundings, including the crumbling roads and buildings. Their incongruity served to remind everyone who saw them or heard them roar past that those who drove them were princes of the nightscape unaffected by worldly problems like pot-holes or police checkpoints.

There was a ritualistic quality to the way car racing would occur on Yangon's roads at night.⁵⁴ One car would pull alongside another, slowing to idle alongside for a few seconds to allow the other car to notice and prepare to race. During the initiation process and the races, drivers displayed a detached calm from the intensity of the race and the danger they faced. They would give the appearance of detachment from the intense battle for

⁵³ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 438, 441.

⁵⁴ Kayleigh Long, "2 Fast 2 Furious," *The Myanmar Times*, January 26, 2015, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/special-features/203-wheels-2015/12944-2-fast-2-furious-inside-yangon-s-drag-racing-scene.html>; Thae Thae, "Than Shwe's Grandson Attends Car Show," *The Irrawaddy*, November 11, 2009, http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=17190.

supremacy they were involved in, continuing to chat, listen to music, answer their phones, and smoke marijuana cigars. The drivers' lack of concentration, the terrible condition of the roads, the influence of alcohol and marijuana, and the general disregard for safety made these races incredibly dangerous for participants, other vehicles on the roads, and pedestrians. The gangsters behaved as though intoxicants and the crumbling roads did not affect them, indicating that they were gods who commanded the nightscape and rode above, and were impervious to, their impoverished countrymen's human weaknesses.

The performance of street races also revealed how global developments were impacting on local practice. The way Myat Thu and other gangsters raced their cars was exemplary in their imitation of popular cultural representations of urban masculinity in Hollywood and East Asian cinema and other media. The stoically silent and powerfully in control gangsters drove with their girls in the passenger seat and an entourage of friends looking on admiringly. The powerful racers seemed to indulge the apparently absurd idea that others might be able to beat them in a race. The image was given a Myanmar flavour with the marijuana rolled in the traditional cheroot cigar leaf, the decrepit roads, the congested traffic of cheap Probox-badged taxis, and the comically ill-equipped law enforcement trying to reign in these powerful figures.

The gangsters' ability to ignore a checkpoint through legal impunity and a willingness to openly defy police and the law indicated the continued status of the gangsters in 2012. Ignoring checkpoints and their ability and confidence to go faster was a triumph of privilege and masculinity. As with Geertz's observation of Balinese cockfights, so the car races in Yangon rendered the "ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances,

where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived.”⁵⁵ The car race was a symbolic dramatization of the gangsters’ status and prestige struggles, representing all manner of things, including “themselves, their social order, abstract hatred, masculinity, demonic power.”⁵⁶ When Myat Tun and other gangsters encountered a police checkpoint, they would either slow down enough for the police to recognise their vehicle or open a tinted window just enough to be identified and flagged through by police. If a police checkpoint was encountered in the middle of a race the cars would often speed around the barriers, sometimes into oncoming traffic. Some races came to an abrupt end when one car sped around a checkpoint while the other driver chose to adhere to the law.

Young people were the target of government imposed curfews, which attempted to reduce violence and antisocial behaviour. For example, in the weeks leading up to President Obama’s 2012 visit, Yangon clubs and bars were given curfews of between 11 pm and 1 am to close in an attempt to clean up Yangon’s nightlife. This curfew was considerably earlier than usual for clubs that were usually open until 4 am, and some clubs including Café Liberal were forced to close during the curfew period (see Map 2). One of the most popular, GTR (see Map 2), which generally reached capacity around midnight was set an 11 pm curfew. GTR continued to open each night, but adhering to its 11 pm curfew meant that it never reached capacity. While these measures did temporarily lessen violent incidents in nightclubs by closing them, they did not lead to any change in behaviour or establish effective security and policing, and the same patterns of violence and car racing simply resumed once the curfews were lifted. The government repeatedly proved ineffectual at controlling young people and addressing

⁵⁵ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 443.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 442.

social problems, including through anachronistic attempts to manage sexual health, alcohol and drug problems through punitive punishment rather than rehabilitation.⁵⁷

If one of these street fights or car races led to actual harm, the gangsters could end up in a court battle that would test the impartiality of the court system to arbitrate between two parties of influential elite young men. If fights escalated to involve the legal system, it proved difficult for the courts to mediate between two elite parties. Local lawyers observed that court cases involving two elite parties were often long and unsuceptible to bribery (which was common in other cases). The legal proceedings would devolve into the judge trying to mediate an outcome that was the least damaging for the courts, the judge, and the lawyers involved, rather than ruling on the merits of the case.⁵⁸ The outcomes were mediocre decisions in favour of the party that was deemed to be superior according to familial power, influence, or notoriety, and against the party that was least likely to have recourse against the courts.⁵⁹ The diminished capacity of the courts to arbitrate freely in these matters indicated the courts' lack of autonomy in many matters.⁶⁰

An analysis of the gangsters' attitudes towards law enforcement and their lingering legal impunity invites several inferences to be made: that old elite practices including legal impunity and reckless behaviour remained a core aspect of the gangsters' identities; and that these young men were resisting efforts to curb their behaviour and freedoms. Elite

⁵⁷ Drugs in particular are likely to present an increasing problem as Myanmar continues to develop, and some awareness campaigns to users and better police targeting of dealers will need to be developed to minimise the potential social health crisis and economic costs. Sexual health education campaigns for example were largely left to NGOs and INGOs who were struggling to cope with demand and increasing rates of infection. Helen James, *Governance and Civil Society in Myanmar: Education, Health, and Environment* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

⁵⁸ On corruption in the courts: Nick Cheesman, "Myanmar's Courts and the Sound Money Makes," in *Myanmar's Transition: Openings, Obstacles and Opportunities*, eds. Nick Cheesman, Monique Skidmore, and Trevor Wilson (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012).

⁵⁹ Personal communications with local lawyers, 2013-2014.

⁶⁰ Justice Base, *Monitoring in Myanmar: An Analysis of Myanmar's Compliance with Fair Trial Rights* (October 2017).

young men's impunity from prosecution limited the effectiveness of any measures to curtail violence in clubs and racing on streets.⁶¹ The police released statements saying they were "prepared to take action against errant drivers, even if they are the sons and daughters of government officials or prominent businesspeople" and that "the children and grandchildren of several prominent Myanmar identities have been strongly linked to illegal street racing and associated violence."⁶² Yet, it was almost unfathomable that the police officers at the checkpoints would have enforced any penalties on these young men given their proclivity to violence following even the mildest slight to their pride and their connections to powerful military figures. The unchecked presence of the main instigators of the majority violence in clubs and on the streets was a serious impediment to achieving civil peace and security.⁶³ Their destabilising effect was amplified by the conditions after 2010, with increased nightlife, lingering legal impunity, and the endless possible slights to their inflated egos contributing to widespread violence in the nightscape of Yangon. By 2016, the previously unrestrained behaviour of the gangsters seemed to have lessened in Yangon, with fewer instances of violence in nightclubs and on the streets observed. In part, this may have been due to the creation of new bars and nightclubs where the gangsters simply did not go, thereby isolating their violence to their favoured stomping grounds, where they primarily only encountered other gangsters and engaged in routine acts of violence.

⁶¹ On legal advocacy and "cause lawyering" in Myanmar, see Nick Cheesman and Kyaw Min San, "Not Just Defending; Advocating for Law in Myanmar," *Wisconsin International Law Journal* 31, no. 3 (2012-2013).

⁶² Htoo Aung, "Yangon police step in to stop illegal races."

⁶³ Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's Coercive Apparatus: The Long Road to Reform," in *Myanmar: The Dynamics of an Evolving Polity*, ed. David Steinberg (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2015).

Political aspirations

As the new generation formed in Myanmar, the influence and status of the old elite qualities diminished. In response to this decline, some gangsters worked to reinvent themselves and move into political roles. This move into politics reflects regional patterns of the durability of elite dynastic rule and the transition of military families into political families. Nay Shwe Thway Aung,⁶⁴ also known as Phyo La Pyae, signalled possible political aspirations in 2015 when he brokered a meeting between his grandfather, former dictator, Than Shwe, and opposition political party leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and subsequently made several political Facebook posts, including commenting on world politics and the election of Donald Trump in America.⁶⁵

In 2015, Nay Shwe Thway Aung signalled a possible transition from the gangster life to that of a political candidate. On 4 December 2015, he used his networks and familial connections to broker a meeting between his grandfather and Aung San Suu Kyi, after Aung San Suu Kyi's political party, the NLD, won the election. This was a momentous moment in Myanmar's history and transformation, and the meeting between Aung San Suu Kyi and Than Shwe was considered instrumental in ensuring a smooth and peaceful transfer of power. The meeting lasted for two hours,⁶⁶ and after the meeting, Nay Shwe Thway Aung reported on his personal Facebook page that his grandfather and Aung San Suu Kyi had provided him with a comment each for him to publish on Facebook from the meeting. Than Shwe's statement said "It is the truth that she will become the future

⁶⁴ Nay Shwe Thwe Aung was Than Shwe's infamous favorite grandson, for more see Aung Zaw, "The Dictators: Part 6 – Popular Dissent Grows," *The Irrawaddy*, April 5, 2013, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/features/the-dictators-part-6-popular-dissent-grows.html>.

⁶⁵ Nay Shwe Thway Aung's Facebook post, November 9, 2016.

⁶⁶ In contrast, Aung San Suu Kyi's meeting with outgoing President Thein Sein lasted less than an hour, Hnin Wint Naing, "Alliances Key to Suu Kyi's Presidential Push," *New Mandala*, January 19, 2016, <http://www.newmandala.org/alliances-key-to-suu-kyis-presidential-push/>.

leader of the country after winning the election. I will support her with all my efforts if she works for the development of the country.” Aung San Suu Kyi’s statement said she held no feelings of revenge or hatred and had wanted to meet Than Shwe to discuss working with the military to build a successful Myanmar.⁶⁷ Moving beyond the significance of the meeting, Nay Shwe Thway Aung’s role invited speculation that he was positioning himself for a political career.

Nay Shwe Thway Aung’s debut as a potential political actor represented a marked shift from his past as a notorious playboy and party-goer. He belongs to the country’s most powerful family and is the grandson of, arguably, its most influential military ruler. With his brokering of the Than Shwe and Aung San Suu Kyi meeting, he signalled a possible intention to move away from the gangsters who were resistant to social change, and towards those who were progressive. The repositioning of former military leaders and their families as legitimate political figures is consistent with regional and international patterns.⁶⁸ It was also consistent with moves by the business community in Myanmar to legitimatise their operations away from sole reliance on military patronage and corrupt business deals.⁶⁹ Nay Shwe Thway Aung’s political turn was an interesting development and suggested that other gangster may follow his lead and reinvent themselves as political leaders in transformed Myanmar.⁷⁰ The overarching transition of power away from overt military rule through an electoral process seemed to invite this kind of reinvention, and

⁶⁷ Jonah Fisher, “What a Signed Banknote Tells Us About Myanmar’s Next Leadership,” *BBC News, Myanmar*, December 7, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35023921>.

⁶⁸ The importance and prevalence of dynastic families in politics in the Southeast Asian region is indicated in the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. See Jemma Purdey, “Political Families in Southeast Asia,” *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 3 (2016); Jemma Purdey, “Narrative to Power: The Case of the Djojohadikusumo Family Dynasty over Four Generations,” *South East Asian Research* 24, no. 3 (2016); Edward Aspinall and Muhammad Uhaib As’ad, “Understanding Family Politics: Successes and Failures of Political Dynasties in Regional Indonesia,” *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 3 (2016).

⁶⁹ Michele Ford, Michael Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, “From Cronyism to Oligarchy? Privatisation and Business Elites in Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 1 (2016).

⁷⁰ Young women were also moving into political roles, see the British Embassy’s Facebook page, posted 12 December 2016; Kyaw Hsu Mon, “KBZ’s Nang Lang Kham: ‘Women Are Taking a Leading Role,’” *The Irrawaddy*, July 22, 2015, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/business/kbzs-namg-lang-kham-women-are-taking-a-lead-role.html>.

encouraged the gangsters to utilise their networks and status to leverage favourable opportunities for their futures, including possible legitimate political careers.

Conclusion

While the gangsters confronted the same social moment as the rest of the new generation, they primarily worked to resist changes to elite composition and practice in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016. Most visibly, they resisted changes to the nightscape of Yangon by reminding the population of the country's history of violence and their families' privileged positions. The gangsters enjoyed relative control of the nightscape up to the end of 2012, although new threats to their status were increasingly common at this stage. In response to these threats, they lashed out in new and unpredictable ways. They displayed a disregard for law enforcement and played on their legal impunity to give the impression that they continued to dominate in Myanmar. By 2016, however, they had lost control of the nightscape, as other social groups remade the Yangon nightscape according to their elite practices. The gangsters were rendered the outdated remnants of a vicissitude of Myanmar history coming to an end.

Through their nightly rituals, the gangsters expressed their uneasy relationship with social and economic changes. They tolerated certain changes, such as expanded leisure opportunities and foreign goods, but they resisted the arrival of new young people in their nightscape and the changes this signalled. In particular, the gangsters resisted changes to the country's gender hierarchy, continuing to expect their girlfriends and future wives to stay safely at home and away from their domain of bars and nightclubs.⁷¹

⁷¹ Moore, *A Passion for Difference*, 69.

As elite composition changed and expanded, the gangsters seemed uncertain of how to quash new threats and they reacted unpredictably.

In 2012, the gangsters acted with a complete disregard for law enforcement.⁷² They sped around police barricades on the roads and used the court system as a mediator in their battles with other elite people. Security guards and police proved unable to effectively curb the gangsters' antisocial and dangerous illegal behaviours. However, the public's increasing support for these campaigns, the imposition of curfews, and the erection of police checkpoints indicated a growing movement against the gangsters' behaviour. The tension between the perseverance of the elite values of the gangsters, albeit diminished, and the widespread social and economic changes occurring despite their protestations points to the influence of other members of the new generation of Myanmar from 2010 to 2016.

⁷² For more on the gangsters' attitudes to law enforcement, see Jacqueline Menager, "Law Fuckers, Cultural Forgers and the Business of Youth Entitlement in Yangon, Myanmar," *South East Asia Research* 22, no. 2 (2014).

Chapter 3

The Cronies

In 2012, the Myanmar National Legislature passed a new Foreign Investment Law, reintegrating Myanmar into the world economy and opening the channels for global flows of information and people.¹ The global flow of people included a group of elite young Myanmar men who had been living abroad. These young men were the sons of Myanmar's business leaders. Their parents had earned their fortunes from decades of lucrative state patronage, which included construction deals and import licenses. These relationships with the military government earned them and their associates the popular moniker "crony," and many were the subject of sanctions from America, Europe, and Australia. The label "crony" was applied indiscriminately to Myanmar's business community at times, and, despite lacking in analytical rigour, it was the most commonly used and recognised local term at the time for these men and their sons.

The young men born into crony families appeared keen to capitalise on the wider legitimisation of Myanmar. Assisting the legitimisation of many crony families after 2010, was that part of the military's preparation for transitioning out of politics had involved divesting state assets in silent auctions to select businessmen. This provided some of the business community with the required independence to become, what Michele Ford, Michael Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein termed "nascent oligarchs."² Myanmar's new

¹ The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Law No. 21/201, November 22, 2012.

² Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, "From Cronyism to Oligarchy?"

generation of the business community completed the transition to oligarchs and established themselves as leading members of the new generation of elite young people.

The sons of Myanmar's crony elite leveraged their parents' financial capital and business networks, with their foreign educations to style themselves as "entrepreneurs." The young men who identified themselves as entrepreneurs worked to develop elitist enclaves in the city, opening flashy new bars and clubs on land owned by their parents, and remaking the gangsters' nightscape.³ The entrepreneurs paraded their inherited wealth to other elite young people in these establishments. They utilised social media as a platform for displaying their wealth to the rest of Myanmar's young people, and some even gained international attention. The outward expressions of the transition from cronyism to oligarchy included conspicuous displays of wealth, which were previously discouraged by the military leaders.⁴

The young men carefully managed their reputations and public image while working to establish themselves as oligarchs. Their infatuation with controlling how they were depicted indicated the increasing importance of domestic adulation for Myanmar's business community after the political upheavals of 2010. The makeover underway, from crony to oligarch, required them to court widespread respect and portray a good reputation in local and foreign media. The kind of image they were portraying and the purposes were different to other social groups of the new generation. The gangsters, for example, simply did not care what was written about them, as they felt they were

³ A 2006 study showed that "greater oligarchic family control over large corporations is associated with worse social economic outcomes," Kathy Fogel, "Oligarchic Family Control, Social Economic Outcomes, and the Quality of Government," *Journal of International Business Studies* 37, no. 5 (2006).

⁴ US Embassy Rangoon, "Burma Sanctions Hitting the Regime Where it Hurts," Wikileaks Cable: 07RANGOON1076_a. Dated October 31, 2007, <https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07RANGOON1076.html>.

untouchable. The underground rappers, in contrast, relied on their gritty personalities to add to their music's popularity and their personal notoriety.

Given the importance of controlling their narrative, the young cronies proved unwilling to relinquish control of that narrative to an academic researcher. A lot of time was spent around these young men in their bars and nightclubs becoming acquainted. However, unlike the other social groups of elite young people, the cronies never took the author into their confidence. The cronies preferred to keep everyone at arm's length only showing what they wanted them to see. They were preoccupied with creating and displaying a new Myanmar entrepreneur identity. Creating that identity involved maintaining an air of untouchability. This Chapter presents that identity, contextualised alongside their families' role in Myanmar. As a result, this Chapter relies less on qualitative material from direct conversations with this group than the other Chapters in this thesis. Instead, this Chapter contains insights from immersive, qualitative social research into the public personas that they displayed in their bars, clubs, and on social media.

From cronies to oligarchs

After around 2012, the new generation of cronies launched themselves into Myanmar's business community as oligarchs. As oligarchs, they worked to establish their families as elite dynasties, including by instituting the practice of taking surnames. The oligarchs were less exclusively focused on wealth creation and more independent from state patronage than their parents had been in previous decades. With their conspicuous displays of wealth, the oligarchs were demonstrating their independence from the state. Their focus was on displaying wealth rather than creating wealth, indicated by their pursuit of more niche business ventures, such as bars and nightclubs that were less

motivated by making money and more aimed at cultivating status.⁵ This shift, from wealth creation and state patronage to displays of wealth, is a feature of a transition from cronyism to oligarchy.⁶

The formation of the cronies in Myanmar, from the making of the colonial state and through the decades of military rule, was a product of private transactions that were reliant on networks and personal relationships.⁷ For decades, the military leaders patronised a select group of cronies for construction projects and other lucrative contracts and business.⁸ Cronies' would cultivate relationships with military leaders knowing it often led to wealth and success.⁹ Corruption, opaque deals, and bribes were an aspect of doing business in Myanmar, similar to many other developing nations.¹⁰ Corruption is often associated with a lack of state capacity and derided as impeding Myanmar's transition to democracy.¹¹ Bribes and corruption were the cost of doing business, but there were also social and personal aspects to these networks.¹² The particulars of military leaders' relationships with members of the business community remain scarce. However, some investigative journalism and reporting has revealed marriages between senior military figures and influential businessmen's children, and

⁵ Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, "From Cronyism to Oligarchy?"

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Jonathan Saha, *Law, Disorder and the Colonial State: Corruption in Burma c. 1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). It should be noted that while relationships were always important for success, the existence of 'cronies' was not the same across different governments, or even dictators. Notably, under Ne Win's socialism from the 1960's through to 1988, these businessmen were perceived as a threat to military power and resources and contracts were kept in military hands. For an account of the historical progression, see Huang, "Re-thinking Myanmar's Political Regime."

⁸ Western sanctions, designed to target and damage these networks, had questionable effects – at best symbolic, at worst devastating to those they were designed to protect. For example, see Kudo, "The Impact of U.S. Sanctions;" Morten Pedersen, *Promoting Human Rights in Burma: A Critique of Western Sanctions Policy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

⁹ Personal relationships were also instrumental in non-business transactions, see Donald M. Seekins, "Myanmar: Secret Talks and Political Paralysis," *Southeast Asia Affairs* (2002).

¹⁰ J.S. Nye, "Corruption and Political Development: A Cost-Benefit Analysis," *The American Political Science Review* 61 (June 1967); James C. Scott, "Corruption, Machine Politics, and Political Change," *The American Political Science Review* 63 (December 1969).

¹¹ Neil Englehart, "Is Regime Change Enough for Burma? The Problem of State Capacity," *Asian Survey* 45 (July/August 2005); Neil Englehart, "Giving Up the Burma Fantasy," *Dissent* 57.2 (Spring 2010).

¹² Jones, "The Political Economy of Myanmar's Transition."

patronage networks that grant the children of military leaders' employment in the companies owned by these businessmen.¹³

The difference between a “crony” and an “oligarch” relates to a businessman's relationship to the state. The distinction is central to Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein's research on Myanmar, which argues that cronies are “those whose positions are favoured by the current regime, regardless of their origins,”¹⁴ whereas oligarchs “have concentrated sufficient wealth and influence so as to be not entirely dependent on patronage; in other words, they are able to exercise a degree of relative autonomy from governing or bureaucratic elites.”¹⁵ Prior to the 1990's in Myanmar, successful businessmen were cronies who served at the whim of military leaders. In the late 1990's, Myanmar's business elites started transitioning from cronies to oligarchs. Oligarch networks started fortifying around family units of power and influence, similar to those analysed in the Philippines.¹⁶

The label “crony” was common in contemporary Myanmar and was applied as an epithet by the wider population to wealthy people.¹⁷ The term gained popularity to describe those businessmen who remained in Myanmar to be corrupted by military rule, rather than relocate to Singapore or elsewhere. Those who remained and made their fortunes from military patronage and nepotism – building empires of property, hotels, airlines, construction companies, football clubs, and import/export businesses – were marked

¹³ Jason Szep and Andrew RC Marshall, “Special Report: An Image Makeover for Myanmar Inc.” *Thompson Reuters*, April 12, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-cronies-image/special-report-an-image-makeover-for-myanmar-inc-idUSBRE83B0YU20120412>.

¹⁴ Paul Hutchcroft, “Oligarchs and Cronies in the Philippine State: The Politics of Patrimonial Plunder.” *World Politics* 43 (1991), 435.

¹⁵ Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, “From Cronyism to Oligarchy?” 22.

¹⁶ Hutchcroft, “Oligarchs and Cronies in the Philippine State,” 422.

¹⁷ Tay Za was the most commonly identified and vilified as a crony by locals during fieldwork and by international media reports, despite not being the wealthiest or the most patronised necessarily.

with the label “crony capitalists.”¹⁸ They included men who often shied from openly disclosing their connections with the military, yet benefited from them. Their actions earned them positions on international sanctions lists, but did not diminish their wealth or status in Myanmar.

Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein argue that Myanmar’s period of privatisation, since 1995, has followed a similar pattern to elsewhere in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.¹⁹ In Myanmar, privatisation of property and assets was part of the broader managed transition of power from overt military rule. This privatisation laid the basis for the materialisation of oligarchs.²⁰ Military leaders were able to manage the transition of power at both the elite political level, and at the economic level by selecting particular individuals to divest state property to through secretive deals, auctions of lucrative contracts, and other unknown transactions.²¹ Myanmar’s privatisation efforts had a strong focus on local capital and relationships between cronies and military leaders appeared to play a decisive role in the allocation of assets and contracts during this period.²²

Cronies were beholden to their military leaders and they were careful not to publically criticise the military as it would jeopardise their wealth creation. Privatisation and the cultivation of nascent oligarchs in Myanmar changed the political economy of the business community from one of cronyism and wealth creation to one of nascent oligarchy and wealth defence. This had a tangible effect on the political influence of

¹⁸ See Szep and Marshall “Special Report”; and Joshua Hammer, “Visiting Myanmar: It’s Complicated” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/travel/visiting-myanmar-its-complicated.html>.

¹⁹ Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, “From Cronyism to Oligarchy?”

²⁰ *ibid.*, 25.

²¹ *ibid.*, 27; Michael Peel, “Myanmar: The Military-Commercial Complex,” *The Financial Times*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/c6fe7dce-d26a-11e6-b06b-680c49b4b4c0>.

²² Kim N.B. Ninh and Matthew Arnold, “Decentralization in Myanmar: A Nascent and Evolving Process,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies* 33 (2016).

businessmen, as it incentivised their involvement in politics to safeguard their wealth.²³ Myanmar's nascent oligarchs displayed increasing autonomy from the military, including through public support for politicians and political parties not aligned with the military. The "image rehabilitation" of several cronies *cum* nascent oligarchs, such as Tay Za and Zaw Zaw, included new-found support for democracy and political activism, commitments to corporate social responsibility initiatives, and contributions to charitable foundations and philanthropy.²⁴ The increasing political profile of some businessmen after 2010 reveals "the incentives for, and capacity of, such business elite to engage more autonomously in the political sphere."²⁵ Some businessmen cultivated relationships with Aung San Suu Kyi and publicly supporting the NLD. Prior to privatisation and the transition to oligarchy, displaying anything but unwavering support for the military would have been a high-risk and carried potentially devastating financial consequences. After 2010, diversifying political allegiances became a strategy of wealth defence, replacing the reliance on the military state under a crony political economy.

With the passage of the Foreign Investment Law in 2012, partnerships with foreign companies became a profitable strategy for wealth defence. As many of the cronies were the subject of international sanctions that prevented their partnership with these foreign companies, their oligarch children played an important part in legitimising their families' businesses. The increased focus on foreign partnerships gave rise to new essential characteristics for Myanmar businessmen, including English language proficiency and an appreciation of values that were important to foreign companies. This shift of focus towards foreign companies and the newly profitable service industries was a significant

²³ Sean Turnell, "Myanmar's Fifty-Year Authoritarian Trap," *Journal of International Affairs* 65 (Fall 2011).

²⁴ Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, "From Cronyism to Oligarchy?" 33.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 37.

adjustment for Myanmar's business community.²⁶ Many divested their businesses to their children in order to overcome international sanctions that would otherwise preclude them from many lucrative foreign partnerships with American, Australian, or European companies.²⁷

After 2012, the children of Myanmar's wealthiest businessmen were increasingly visible. A Reuters article from 2012 traces some of these familial links between the generations, including Tay Za (of Htoo Group) and his eldest son Phyo Tay Za, Aung Ko Win (of KBZ Group) and his daughter Nang Lang Kham, and Khin Shwe (of Zaykabar) and his son Zay Thiha. These formerly crony families further entrenched their elite status and networks with favourable marriages. The Zaykabar family with the marriage of Khin Shwe's daughter, Zay Zin Latt, to the then lower house speaker and former military general Shwe Mann's son, Toe Naing Mann (of Redlink Co.).²⁸ This second generation was less associated with the country's military past, and some were instrumental in partnerships with foreign companies. The crony families who were successful in forming partnerships with foreign companies and receiving transfers of state assets had effectively secured their families' networks of power and wealth through the economic and political uncertainty of 2010 to 2012.²⁹ Their children then completed the transition from nascent oligarchs to oligarchs, and from wealth defence to wealth displays.

Reputation management and shared transgression

After the passage of the Foreign Investment Law, many young oligarchs returned from overseas, recognising the burgeoning potential for them to establish themselves as

²⁶ William Boot, "Crony Capitalists Vying for Oligarchy," *The Irrawaddy*, July 31, 2012, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/business/crony-capitalists-vying-for-oligarchy.html>.

²⁷ Tha Lun Zaung Htet, "TayZa Wants to Stop Chairing Gems Association," *The Irrawaddy*, February 4, 2013, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/archives/25984>.

²⁸ Szep and Marshall, "Special Report."

²⁹ Sean Turnell, "Myanmar in 2011: Confounding Expectations," *Asian Survey* 52 (2012).

entrepreneurs and exhibit their wealth. Some oligarchs crafted the identity of the entrepreneur through meticulous reputation management. In 2013, the author contacted two young oligarchs for an interview for a potential article on elite young Myanmar people.³⁰ The brothers were “very keen” on the idea at first, and made plans to accommodate a photographer to follow them around for a day. Finding a day when they were both in Yangon and comfortable allowing access to their schedule took some negotiation – they wanted to be followed on a weekday when they would spend most of the day “in their offices,” and not on the weekends when they had wine tastings, themed parties, and other social engagements. It was agreed that the interview and photographs would occur in their homes and offices, not at night in bars or at parties, at their insistence. Their interest in the interview immediately soured though, when they were informed that the article would feature a number of young people. They voiced concern at being included in an article with people from the “so-called socialite circle.” They promptly broke off communications, and the interviews did not go ahead. On numerous occasions in the years that followed, they would politely greet and make small talk with the author until they drifted onto the next table to mingle – insulated once more in the safety of their bars playing the role of the well-connected wealthy entrepreneur.

It was never known why they withdrew from the project, but some inferences are possible. It seemed that the initial request had appealed to their egos and the potential publicity, if well managed, could have been very beneficial for them, so they had contemplated granting conditional access to their personal lives. However, the involvement of other young people, who the young men did not hold in the same esteem as themselves being from cultural worlds of fashion and music, may have raised concern that the resulting article could trivialise what they considered their serious business

³⁰ Fieldwork notes, October 2013.

endeavours alongside these young people who they dismissed as frivolous “socialites.” The concern that they would not approve of their representation was not an irrational one: the foreign media did have a predilection for depicting the cronies as indulgent socialites wasting their parents’ money, indifferent to the suffering and inequality of their countrymen.³¹ The idea that being profiled alongside socialites would damage their reputations also revealed that they considered themselves vastly different, and superior, to socialites.

Despite the cronies’ aversion to the socialite label, socialising was an important aspect of the entrepreneurial identity. An analysis of the way these young men behaved in the bars and nightclubs of Yangon revealed their cultural lineage of self-confidence, which came with “the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy.”³² The entrepreneur’s confidence was obvious in bars when they drifted from their table to others, making jokes with ease and aplomb. While the entrepreneurs were comfortable enough to act the fool, other tables of less affluent patrons were on their best behaviour. The tables on their best behaviour were full of young people who came to these bars irregularly, often for special occasions such as for birthdays or on New Year’s Eve. These young people were part of Myanmar’s growing middle-class.³³ It was apparent that the expensive bar location was not as comfortable for these new middle-class patrons as for the cronies who treated it almost as their home, rather than as the location for special nights out.

³¹ See for example Shibani Mahtani, “Meet the New Rich... in Myanmar,” *Wall Street Journal: Money*, September 4, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/meet-the-new-richin-myanmar-1409756369>, which carried the by-line: ‘As the country opens up, a group of high-end wealthy are showing up—and showing off—amid decay and poverty’.

³² Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 59.

³³ Hsu Myat Thazin, “A Not-So-Golden Culture of Extravagance,” *The Irrawaddy*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/a-not-so-golden-culture-of-extravagance.html>.

Socialising and creating networks of reciprocity and favours provided some stability in an otherwise uncertain and unstable period of Myanmar history for the young oligarchs.³⁴ In order to ensure an oligarch was considered or approached for business opportunities, it was important that they presented themselves as powerful.³⁵ Oligarchs would stage elaborate displays of power at restaurants, bars and nightclubs by controlling all decisions, and by paying extortionate bills with an air of nonchalance. There were, broadly, three types of table configurations of these young men. At one, there would be a clear leader: the reservation would be made in his name, on arrival he would take charge of ordering all the food and drinks, waiters would come to him for decisions throughout the evening, and at the end of the evening he would pay the bill without any discussion or offers to pay coming from his friends. If a table was gathered for a special event, such as a birthday or farewell, the young man being honoured would be in control of the evening. The final type of table was more common for the oligarch and included several elite young men of similar levels of wealth and power. An evening at the final type of table involved considerably more dynamism and posturing for control than the other two types.

At a table that included several elite young men of similar levels of wealth and power every decision would be a considered exercise in posturing and represented an attempt to wrest control of the table and assert superiority. Each order of a new bottle of liquor, demand for staff to take a photo, signal for a waiter to pour a drink, or suggestion for

³⁴ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1990), 105.

³⁵ While the entrepreneurs stood in stark comparison to the majority of Myanmar people, they reflected regional identity trends. In China, for example, networking and socialising is essential for business success among the new rich. John Osburg argues that there is a “moral economy” of elite networks, in which favours are done without necessarily having any short term designs to ask for them to be repaid. Instead, favours establish networks of indebtedness that can be drawn on later, if required. Favours also create a sense of attachment. See John Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China's New Rich* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Alan Smart, “Gifts, Bribes, and Guanxi: A Reconsideration of Bourdieu's Social Capital,” *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (1993).

where and when to go next was an assertion of authority and power. An overflowing table symbolised their disposable wealth to others and an obscene level of wastage accompanied such posturing – tables would order large amounts of food and drink without any concessions to practical considerations such as appetite and without any intention of finishing it.

Elsewhere, young men would display their wealth by ordering an enormous amount of food and drinks or a particularly expensive drink and then leaving the table without offering to pay before the bill arrived. This practice seemed to impart that money meant so little to them that they did not even consider it. When a young man did this, it was a relatively powerful move and was difficult to counter. The young man left to pay the bill could admit their subordinate position by protesting the bill or asking for the money, thereby admitting they did not have the same level of disregard for money. Alternatively, they would pay the extortionate bill and be made internally aware of the other's claimed superiority and accept their position. This move would often be accompanied by joking disparagement of each other's wealth and power.

The way young Myanmar oligarchs enlivened their power struggles into the social realm, supports Rosita Armytage's observations of the importance of the melding of social and professional worlds for elites.³⁶ Armytage conducted fieldwork in Pakistan, investigating how influential people would host parties in order to gather people who may prove useful to one another. Alcohol at these parties was a symbol of prestige as a result of being difficult to procure and worked to symbolically unite those at the parties through the transgression that is consuming alcohol in Pakistan. This creates a sense of trust, indicates common liberal attitudes, and the networking that ensues "transcends

³⁶ Rosita Armytage, "The Social Lives of the Elite: Friendship and Power in Pakistan," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16 (2015).

instrumental goals and take on genuine qualities of affection and friendship.”³⁷ Armytage argues that this style of networking is undertaken in Pakistan due to the insecurity of elite people’s power and privilege resulting from political and economic instability. These parties and socialising events unite those from Pakistan’s various subgroups of elite, comprised of politicians, businessmen, bureaucrats, and military men. By creating networks, individuals strengthen and reinforce their elite privilege.³⁸ Individuals engaged in socialising, networking, and friendships with those of “near social parity” in order to solidify their privileged positions increasing their indispensability in business and friendship.³⁹

Myanmar’s cronies are the product of decades of nepotism and favouritism involving the kind of socialising Armytage describes, although the social and political milieu is profoundly different. In Myanmar, oligarchs continued to engage in nepotism and favouritism, working to enshrine power and influence along familial lines. Where previously military rulers and their cronies would socialise and have special relationships behind closed doors, the oligarchs were now working to establish long-lasting social connections to ensure their continued successes. Where previously corruption and favouritism would be carefully shielded from public view, after 2010 evidence of it could be witnessed in public restaurants and bars.

Adding to the immodesty of the oligarchs’ displays, was a sexual dimension to the way elite people fostered relationships and networks. Again, this is not unique to Myanmar:

³⁷ *ibid*, 449.

³⁸ *ibid*, 451.

³⁹ Armytage also suggests that Pakistanis of all social classes have similar patronage networks to handle uncertainties, see Stephen M. Lyon, “Power and Patronage in Pakistan” (PhD dissertation, University of Kent, 2002), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download;jsessionid=241AF34AB16364D7D12BD552BFA5A8AE?doi=10.1.1.199.5530&rep=rep1&type=pdf>; Stephen M. Lyon, *An Anthropological Analysis of Local Politics and Patronage in a Pakistani Village* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

Anne Allison conducted an ethnographic study of corporate businessmen in Tokyo, Japan to reveal the role of sex, sexuality, and pleasure in business.⁴⁰ In Tokyo, Allison found that businessmen used alcohol to justify and excuse “silly” and fun behaviour. Under cover of alcohol, businessmen would eschew the sober seriousness of life and foster connections outside of the office.⁴¹ The men frequented hostess clubs where gender roles were exaggerated and hostesses facilitated conversation.⁴² Under the guise of throwing off the strict expectations and sobriety of their daily lives, men instead adhered to another set of prescribed rules. The rules of these places upheld a ritual of masculinity and debauchery. These places institutionalised a particular form of ritualised male dominance and robust relationships between workers and their work. Allison’s study of Tokyo hostess clubs highlights the way “play” (sexuality, pleasure, and night-time frivolity) can be an important aspect in establishing and maintaining business networks, masculine identities, socialisation patterns, and economic realities.

The case of Myanmar indicates an intersection of Allison’s theory of the role of sex and fun, and Armytage’s theory of shared transgression. In Myanmar, young male oligarchs were often complicit in one another’s infidelities. For example, one young oligarch, Pyae Sone, had a marriage that had been organised by his parents with a young woman, Mya Aye, who was the daughter of another influential Myanmar businessman. Pyae Sone, however, was in love with another young woman, Pyu Pyu. Pyae Sone and Pyu Pyu were in a relationship and would socialise as girlfriend and boyfriend with Pyae Sone’s friends. There was an unspoken agreement regarding Pyae Sone’s arranged marriage and the difficulty that his relationships with Pyu Pyu presented. For over a year, their friends never publicly posted a photo of the two, never commented on rumours about the

⁴⁰ Anne Allison, *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 45-46.

⁴² *ibid.*, 57-76.

relationship and Pyae Sone's arranged marriage, and never betrayed any concern or issue with Pyae Sone carrying on the relationship and making them all complicit in his infidelity. Pyae Sone would appear at family events with Mya Aye and his family never spoke of his relationship with Pyu Pyu, although they were aware of it. Eventually, the relationship between Pyae Sone and Pyu Pyu broke up, and Pyae Sone was engaged to Mya Aye. Publicly, the engagement was trouble free and a marriage of two powerful families. Privately, Pyae Sone's friends knew that he has given way to pressure and familial responsibility to marry Mya Aye. Through this experience, the bonds between Pyae Sone and his friends were strengthened through shared subterfuge and mutual support for one another, in an otherwise unstable and uncertain country. During this time, Pyae Sone and some of the other young men undertook a number of business ventures together and the foundations of some potentially important networks for the future of Myanmar's oligarch families were established.

From 2012 to 2015, the new generation of oligarchs was in the initial stages of forming networks, negotiating hierarchies, and settling on boundaries of their entrepreneurial identity. Through shared transgressions and public displays of wealth, the oligarchs formed powerful personal connections with other oligarchs. The entrenchment of the oligarchs brought Myanmar into line with the experiences of other countries' development and the global elite identity of young businessmen as entrepreneurs. The oligarchs engaged with the global identity of the entrepreneur through social media, and Instagram in particular, as a platform for self-promotion and as a means to verify their lifestyles and values as elite in Myanmar.

The online production of elite distinction

In the landscape of Myanmar's social transformation, social media added a new dimension for identity creation and promotion, representing a new domain for the contestation of elite dominion in Myanmar and globally. By dominating the online depiction of what elite looked like in Myanmar, the oligarchs took control of the discourse of elite distinction and installed themselves as elite luminaries worthy of emulation and envy. Their depiction of "super-rich lifestyles"⁴³ on social media confirmed them as part of the "new global elite."⁴⁴ Secondary accounts re-posted the oligarchs' photos and validated their images and lifestyles as worthy of reproduction, creating echo chambers.⁴⁵ Through Instagram, these young people's lives became more visible and yet less accessible. Instagram provided a constant stream of images revealing users' private lives, or at least, the private lives they wished to broadcast.

The online identities of Yangon's cronies presented strikingly similar aesthetics to the global elite identity, marking them as members of not only Myanmar's elite but of a global elite. During this period, the touchstone of this global elite aesthetic was the Instagram account "Rich Kids of Instagram," which reposted from young people's original accounts. One of the highest achievements for the elite social media exhibitionist was to be reposted on the Rich Kids of Instagram account – and several young Myanmar

⁴³ Mike Featherstone, "Super-Rich Lifestyles," in *Elite Mobilities*, eds. Thomas Birtchnell and Javier Caletrio (Routledge: Oxon, 2014).

⁴⁴ Chrystia Freeland, "The Rise of the New Global Elite," *The Atlantic*, January/February 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/01/the-rise-of-the-new-global-elite/308343/>.

⁴⁵ The metaphor of "echo chambers" captures the idea that people have a tendency to seek out information that confirms their existing views and avoid media that would challenge their beliefs. Cass Sunstein applied this rhetoric to online debates in particular, under the metaphor of echo chambers, see Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). A more recent article argues that online debates can more accurately be described as "trench warfare" rather than echo chambers. This incorporates the idea that arguing against contradicting arguments online may have similar effects on attitude reinforcement as confirming arguments, see Rune Karlsen et al, "Echo Chamber and Trench Warfare Dynamics in Online Debates" *European Journal of Communication* 32, no 3 (2017).

people attained this level of global prestige. The symbolic value of this reposting included validation of a young person as a “rich kid” and a member of an international clique of elite people.

In the online landscape of “rich kids,” Sophie Spieler argues that Instagram in general, and the voyeur account “Rich Kids of Instagram” in particular, “formalises and routinises the spectacle of elite distinction.”⁴⁶ Drawing on Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle, which argues that a spectacle is “not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images,” Spieler argues that the image filled world of Instagram is a spectacle.⁴⁷ The “Rich Kids of Instagram” account catalogues those who, in its own words, “have more money than you and this is what they do.”⁴⁸ The account contributes to an overall standardisation of the aesthetics of privilege – the abundance of “iconic objects and commodities (cars and brand-name accessories), ritualised patterns of behaviour (partying, vacationing), and fetishized spaces (interiors and exteriors of houses)” – which social media and Instagram in particular has portrayed as a “spectacle of elite distinction.”⁴⁹

The Myanmar version of the “Rich Kids of Instagram” account, called “Rich Kids of Myanmar,” documented the “life [sic] of the real rich kids of well-known family [sic] in Myanmar [Myanmar flag emoji].”⁵⁰ The Myanmar account reposted photos initially uploaded by “rich kids” themselves. The administrators of the account claimed they created the account because they “idolise” the young people they featured and because

⁴⁶ Sophie Spieler, “‘Our Everyday Is Better Than Your Best Day’: Spectacle and the Politics of Ambiguity on the Tumblr Blog *Rich Kids of Instagram*” in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, eds. Sebastien M. Herrmann, Carolin Alice Hofmann, Katja Kanzler, Stefan Schubert, and Frank Usbeck (Germany: University Winter Heidelberg, 2015), 302.

⁴⁷ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, (London: Rebel Press, 2006), 44.

⁴⁸ The Rich Kids of Instagram’s Instagram account description, @richkidsofinstagram; Spieler, “‘Our Everyday Is Better Than Your Best Day.’”

⁴⁹ Spieler, “‘Our Everyday Is Better Than Your Best Day,’” 295.

⁵⁰ The Rich Kids of Myanmar’s Instagram account, @therichkidsofmyanmar.

“their lifestyle can make us envious like never before!”⁵¹ The administrators of the Rich Kids of Myanmar account said they were “not rich kids” and that they started the account after “following the Rich Kids of Instagram (RKOI) on Instagram.” One administrator said they “have always loved seeing rich kids’ lifestyles and I wanted to show them to motivate everyone to do well in their life.”⁵² The administrators seemed to take pride in showing that Myanmar had rich kids that belonged to this global network of elite young people. Despite emulating these lifestyles, such lives were unattainable for the majority of the Myanmar population. As one of the “rich kids” says on his Instagram page, “they picture it, we live it.”⁵³ The oligarchs of Myanmar saw the potential of Instagram as a platform for self-promotion, and the “Rich Kids of Myanmar” validated that promotion and disseminated it to a wider audience.

The Myanmar audience of the Rich Kids of Myanmar account appeared to be divided between those who venerated and respected the young people featured and others who abhorred their behaviour. This was similar to the response faced by the original Rich Kids of Instagram account. Below Instagram photos there is a space where the account’s “followers” can leave comments. The comments section on photos on the Rich Kids of Instagram account and the Rich Kids of Myanmar account included criticism of the reckless spending, arrogance, and narcissistic ostentation on display in the photos. In short, the accounts created a “spectacle of privilege,” which opened the rich kids to public denouncement for being “undeserving.” On the Rich Kids of Instagram account, critics expressed sentiments such as “they [the rich kids] did not earn the money they so vociferously spend, [and] their mere existence is an affront to the meritocratic principle held dear by many Americans.”⁵⁴ On the Rich Kids of Myanmar account, the comments

⁵¹ The Rich Kids of Myanmar’s Instagram post, 10 September 2016.

⁵² The Rich Kids of Myanmar’s Instagram post, 25 August 2016.

⁵³ Instagram account description, private account.

⁵⁴ Spieler, “Our Everyday Is Better Than Your Best Day”, 304.

were generally more positive, with young people saying they were “proud” of their countrymen and had great “respect” for what they have achieved. However, there were also comments from those who pointed out that the wealth on display by the young people was the result of their parents’ work and corrupt business deals. Individuals who made negative comments would often have their comments deleted and were swiftly blocked from following or viewing the photos.

One young Myanmar Instagram celebrity, Thura Oo, featured on Rich Kids of Instagram and was a mainstay of the Rich Kids of Myanmar account.⁵⁵ Thura Oo was a self-professed “Proud Burmese” who described himself as an “Entrepreneur & Part-Time Asshole.”⁵⁶ Analysing the way that Thura Oo refined and adapted his online profile reveals the process involved in developing an online presence that revealed an oligarch’s extravagant consumption. Thura Oo began cultivating his online presence at the age of seventeen. His early posts betrayed a level of immaturity and an identity under construction, compared to when his idea of wealth appeared to stabilise in his early twenties. Thura Oo’s online presence conformed to the global development of a super-rich lifestyle⁵⁷ of the internationally mobile elite,⁵⁸ which was supported by a “truly global culture industry openly committed to the symbolic production of elite status, distinction and privilege.”⁵⁹

It proved difficult to spend time with Thura Oo, as he lived permanently in Singapore attending university and only visited Yangon for short vacations. Instead, the author spent considerable time with a number of his close friends. They attended private

⁵⁵ Benny Luo, “Exotic Cars and Expensive Watches: The Life of a Burmese Oil Tycoon’s Son,” *Next Shark*, March 30, 2015, <https://nextshark.com/rich-kids-of-instagram-sheikh-shujah-oil-tycoon/>.

⁵⁶ Thura Oo Blog, description, August 2014, <http://thuraoo.blogspot.com/>.

⁵⁷ Featherstone, “Super-Rich Lifestyles.”

⁵⁸ Karin Fast and Johan Lundell, “The Elastic Mobility of Business Elites – Negotiating the ‘Home’ and ‘Away’ Continuum,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2016).

⁵⁹ Crispin Thurlow and Adam Jaworski, ‘Elite Mobilities: The Semiotic Landscapes of Luxury and Privilege,’ *Social Semiotics* 22, no. 4 (2012), 487.

international schools in Yangon and went on to attend universities in Australia, Singapore, America, and England. His Yangon-based friends' attitudes and habits appeared to mirror his lifestyle, but without his Instagram notoriety. The discrepancy between the commanding and independent life that Thura Oo presented online was in stark contrast to the reality of these young men who lived at home with their parents. They spent their time going to school, doing homework, using their allowances to buy beer, and flirting with young women.

Thura Oo, also known as Sheikh Shujahuddin,⁶⁰ was the twenty-one year old son of Sheikh Babu Nooruddin, CEO of Straits Trading, who Thura Oo called one of "Burma's Oil Magnate's [sic]." His blog advised that young people should follow his posts to "keep up to date with the latest trends in fashion for men and women. From Hublots to Louboutins I will be sure to keep you posted on whats [sic] hot and whats [sic] not."⁶¹ In a post from April 2013 about his new US\$60,000 Rolex Presidential 18 karat gold watch, Thura Oo explained that he thought it was "perfect for someone suave, perhaps the modern day debonair," like him.⁶² While his collection of expensive watches and cars may have been an indicator of wealth, their conspicuous display on social media with hashtags such as #billionaire, #oilmoney, #MyWholeFamilyGotItMade, and #socialite lacked refinement.⁶³ The image Thura Oo presented was in keeping with the aesthetic of elite privilege that Spieler details –watches, leather goods, holidays, cars, and enormous houses – although the Myanmar rich kid aesthetic often derived a level of exoticism from their Myanmar background.

⁶⁰ "Singapore Tycoon's Son. Arrogant, Playboy, Geek?" *Rich Kinds of Singapore*, November 22, 2012, <http://richkidsofasia.blogspot.com/2012/11/singapore-tycoon-son-arrogant-playboy.html>.

⁶¹ Thura Oo Blog.

⁶² Thura Oo Blog, March 2015, "New Roles Presidential 18k Gold," <http://thuraoo.blogspot.com/2013/04/new-rolex-presidential-18k-gold.html>

⁶³ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 23

Myanmar was mentioned in Thura Oo's Instagram tagline, where he said he was a "Proud Burmese." He also posted photos of impoverished Myanmar children with captions saying he was going to "help them" or "give something back." Thura Oo positioned himself as a philanthropist, although there was no evidence that he was involved in any charity work. The idea that Thura Oo had attained a level of wealth and security that he had the time and resources to think about and pursue philanthropy appeared to fit into Thura Oo's idea of a wealthy person, while the performance of actual aid work appeared less imperative for the "modern day debonair."

Buried among his photos of watches, cars, and clothing was a photo of Myanmar children on a rural dirt road flanked by bamboo shacks. In the photo caption, he declared, "what we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains immortal," followed up in his comments with, "It's about time I help those around me."⁶⁴ Thura Oo did not reference the author of the quote, Albert Pike, a Confederate military officer.⁶⁵ Pike was a prominent Freemason who supported slavery and was allegedly involved in the formation of the Ku Klux Klan. Although Illuminati (and Freemason) symbolism was common in celebrity and hip-hop culture, it appears to be unlikely that Thura Oo was intentionally quoting Pike. Quote aside, the image and the caption presented a spectacular opposition between the life of Thura Oo and that of the Burmese children in the photo.⁶⁶

Instagram offered a window into a world of extravagant consumption that most would never be able to reproduce. Instagram was a tool for self-promotion and self-curation

⁶⁴ Thura Oo's Instagram photo, June 2015, <http://instagram.com/p/l63qSgObon/>.

⁶⁵ Albert Pike, *Ex Corde Locutiones: Words from the Heart Spoken of His Dead Brethren* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 1993).

⁶⁶ Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Verso, 2011), 9; Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 44; Clayton Rosati, "Guy Debord, 'Gilded Poverty', and the Contemporary Crisis: On Marxism, Spectacle, and the Banality of Inequality," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 53, no. 3 (2012).

that allowed users to project a vision of the life that they valued. The rise of the young Myanmar people engaging in this symbolism on Instagram confirmed Myanmar's social transformation and increasing integration with regional development patterns and global trends, including increasing inequality and greater conspicuous consumption displayed through social media. Further, the lifestyle of the rich kids displayed an alternate masculinity to the hegemonic masculine identity of the gangsters. The oligarchs were not racing the Yangon streets at night, violently defending their privilege in smoky bars like the gangsters. Instead, they were waging a battle against that identity on social media, with photos of watches, cars, champagne, and leather goods signifying a suave and debonair identity of refined luxury.

Freedom for conspicuous consumption

As Mannheim argued, the new generation develops in dialogue with the existing generation.⁶⁷ The oligarchs mediated and adjusted their parents' crony identities and lifestyles to the changed social conditions of Myanmar after 2012. A case study of one of the most well-known cronies, Tay Za, and his children – his eldest son, Phyo Tay Za, his youngest son, Htet Tay Za, and his daughter, Rachel Tay Za – provides an indication of how crony parents and their oligarch children worked to transform their families into oligarchic dynasties. Prior to 2012, the Tay Za family appeared to be setting themselves up to become one of Myanmar's dynasty families, including by adopting their father's name as a surname. While Burmese names do not have surnames, Myanmar's elite families were beginning to adopt the practice of taking surnames, to establish a connection between the children and their familial lineage of wealth and power.⁶⁸ While there were no comprehensive biographies of the Tay Za family, it is possible to piece

⁶⁷ Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," 379.

⁶⁸ David Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), xii.

together their emergence as an elite crony family from various interviews, local media, leaked American Embassy cables, and academic research.

The new generation of the Tay Za family exhibited their increasing independence from the state through conspicuous consumption and public displays of wealth. One display of this wealth was Phyto Tay Za's Bugatti Veyron – one of only 100 of the \$4 million supercars ever made. Along with a fleet of other supercars owned by Tay Za's eldest son, the Veyron was rarely driven on Yangon's potholed and traffic jammed streets. It did not fit in, it was jarringly expensive, and it was no doubt difficult to import. The choice of car did not seem to be motivated by the potential enjoyment to be derived from driving it, as it was not comfortable or easy to drive in Yangon. It also seemed to be about more than just parading conspicuous wealth, as this could have been achieved with other more recognisable and easier to attain cars. Instead, the Veyron was chosen as it set Phyto Tay Za apart from other wealthy people, displaying his command of the networks necessary to import the car and the taste distinction associated with choosing a rare supercar instead of a more common luxury vehicle. The Veyron was an instance when the family demonstrated both their wealth and connections, but also that the family had the freedom to ostentatiously display their wealth and power. Myanmar society was transitioning from oppressive adherence to conservative values defined and enforced by the military to a new paradigm where the population was freer to define their own elite qualities and lifestyles.

Tay Za has been cited as Myanmar's "richest man,"⁶⁹ "flashiest tycoon," and "one of the most vilified associates of Myanmar's former junta."⁷⁰ He married into the wealthy Htoo family and then used his "charming, charismatic, and generous" personality to gain

⁶⁹ Joshua Hammer, "Visiting Myanmar."

⁷⁰ Szep and Marshall, "Special Report."

favour with senior military figures, finally earning the title of “Than Shwe’s favourite crony.”⁷¹ His two sons, as described in American Embassy cables and the social pages of local media, conformed to the stereotype of obnoxious rich kids.⁷² As one leaked American Embassy Cable reads, “Tay Za’s [youngest] son does maintain a Facebook page with pictures of him [Htet Tay Za] sitting in his Ferraris with semi-automatic weapons.”⁷³ On 26 October 2007, it was reported that the senior generals called Tay Za to Naypyidaw and “read him the riot act, demanding that he and his family stop ‘flaunting their wealth.’”⁷⁴ Their behaviour was seen as attracting negative attention from America and other countries, which was leading to an entrenchment of American sanctions that were causing cash flow issues for the military leaders and Tay Za.

The military’s warning to the Tay Za family to temper their displays of wealth came at about the same time that the military was increasing its privatisation efforts. While privatisation had been officially underway in Myanmar since 1995, it was not until 2008 that widespread and extensive transfers of state assets occurred across a wide range of sectors, including mining, transportation, infrastructure, and manufacturing.⁷⁵ A possibly unintended consequence of the privatisation agenda was the independence that it granted

⁷¹ US Embassy Rangoon, “Burma: A Tale of Two Cronies,” Wikileaks Cable: 07RANGOON1090, November 6, 2007. This is denied by Tay Za, who said in 2011 that he had only met Than Shwe once, quoted in Simon Montlake, “Burma’s Showy Crony,” *Forbes*, September 28, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/global/2011/1010/feature-people-burma-showy-crony-capitalism-luxury-za-montlake.html>.

⁷² When Htet Tay Za was 19, he allegedly wrote an email saying “US ban us? We’re still fucking cool in Singapore. See my photos? We’re sitting on the whole Burmese GDP. We’ve got timber, gems and gas to be sold to other countries like Singapore, China, India and Russia,” quoted in Wai Moe, “Irrawaddy: Tay Za’s Son Ridicules US Sanctions – Wai Moe,” *BurmaNet News*, October 26, 2007, <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2007/10/26/irrawaddy-tay-za%E2%80%99s-son-ridicules-us-sanctions-wai-moe/>; for more unfounded rumours and Myanmar celebrity news see Myanmar Celebrity blog, <http://www.myanmarcelebrity.com/>.

⁷³ US Embassy Rangoon, “Burma Sanctions Hitting the Regime Where it Hurts.”

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ The first phase of privatization, from 1995-2007, had limited impact only resulting in the transfer and sale of state enterprises and assets, while the second phase underway since 2008 was more significant in scope; Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, “From Cronyism to Oligarchy?,” 25-8.

the business sector from governing structures.⁷⁶ The privatisation of some state assets into Tay Za's control may have contributed to the family's increasing independence and ability to ignore the military's warning as they began on the trajectory towards oligarchy.⁷⁷

After 2012, the Tay Za family's displays included the opening of a number of bars and nightclubs patronised by Yangon's burgeoning elite, repatriate, and expatriate communities. Htet Tay Za opened a bar in Yangon aptly titled "Escape Gastro Bar," and it was an escape from the harsh realities of much of Yangon life. Phyto, Htet, and Rachel Tay Za continued to publicise their extravagant lifestyles, with various social media pages documenting their world travels and holidays that were replete with private jets, luxury boats, designer clothes, and fast cars. Htet Tay Za offered a glimpse of what he and his peers valued in a nightlife scene with an announcement for new club, which he promised would introduce "a new concept to the current nightlife scene in Yangon, [based] on four main pillars we call YUCE: Young, Upscale, Chic, Exclusive."⁷⁸ The Tay Za children's ability and freedom to exhibit their wealth and behave free from state scrutiny or reprimand was a testament to their oligarch status.

Tay Za appeared to be a model nascent oligarch, cultivating a personal image and reputation among the Myanmar population as a generous and committed philanthropist. He claimed to have donated millions to various causes, including schools, hospitals, and pagodas.⁷⁹ He sponsored athletes, funded conservation work, and deployed medical care to remote areas – all documented on social media in Burmese language. In 2011, his

⁷⁶ Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, "From Cronyism to Oligarchy?" 29; Sean Turnell, "Myanmar in 2010: Doors Open, Doors Close," *Asian Survey* 51, no. 1 (2010), 153.

⁷⁷ David Parker and Colin Kirkpatrick, "Privatisation in Developing Countries: A Review of the Evidence and Policy Lessons," *Journal of Development Studies* 41, no. 4 (2005), 531.

⁷⁸ Survey Monkey survey, "New Upscale Nightclub in Yangon," 2013, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/?sm=JO5Q8Wm02dyGy8YF%2BumW5Q%3D%3D>.

⁷⁹ Brian McCartan, "Smart Sanctions Target Myanmar Tycoon," *Asian Times Online*, February 21, 2008, <https://business-humanrights.org/en/smart-sanctions-target-myanmar-tycoon>.

focus on philanthropy increased following a near-death experience after a helicopter crash, as his eldest son Phyo Tay Za said, “everything is different for him now. He is doing a lot of foundation work. He is doing more contributions for society. Less greed.”⁸⁰ The post-2010 government endorsed him, awarding a President’s Excellent Performance Award to his company, the Htoo Foundation, for National Best Social Welfare Team.⁸¹ Tay Za’s focus on public perception and philanthropy were somewhat ahead of their time, coming as a precursor to the new generation of oligarchs’ preoccupation with reputation and image maintenance after 2012. Tay Za’s youngest son, Htet Tay Za, appeared to emulate his father’s philanthropy when he donated money to a man who was suffering from “rotten legs” that he could not afford to have amputated.⁸² While the family’s compulsion to charity works can be interpreted as reparations for damages they had caused – through environmentally destructive construction projects and business decisions that seemed solely driven by personal wealth creation at the expense of the Myanmar population – a possible moral element cannot be completely dismissed.⁸³ Tay Za primarily promoted his charitable actions in Burmese language on his Facebook page, which had a predominately Myanmar fan base. The audience for stories of his good will and charitable nature was the Myanmar population and not the international community. His philanthropy was not calibrated to pander to pressure to improve his international image, rather it seemed to be an effort to improve his domestic reputation.

⁸⁰ Szep and Marshall “Special Report.”

⁸¹ Hsu Hlaing Htun, “Tycoons call for an end to tax evasion at awards ceremony,” *The Myanmar Times*, May 12, 2014, <https://www.mmtimes.com/business/10292-tycoons-call-for-an-end-to-tax-evasion-at-award-ceremony.html>.

⁸² Htet Tay Za’s Facebook page, 2014.

⁸³ Paul G. Schervish, “Why the wealthy give: Factors which mobilize philanthropy among high net-worth individuals,” in *The Routledge Companion to Nonprofit Marketing*, eds. Adrian Sargeant and Walter Wymer, (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 165.

In the lead up to the 2015 elections, Tay Za began to take a more active role in Myanmar's domestic politics, openly supporting Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD.⁸⁴ For a crony, reliant on military patronage and thereby military-political leadership, supporting Aung San Suu Kyi in an election where her party was running against the military-backed USDP would have been economic, political, and social suicide, but Tay Za showed that for a nascent oligarch under a quasi-military government it was not. Rather, Tay Za's cultivation of his personal image and his concern for public perception perhaps made him acutely aware of the change of political calculus underway in Myanmar. As a result, he made the decision to shift his political weight to support the NLD as the party that had the potential to best represent his future interests.

Despite Tay Za's focus on his domestic reputation and Myanmar politics, his oligarch children remained engaged in the world outside of Myanmar. For education, socialising, vacationing, business, and investment international borders were fluid to the oligarchs, for whom travel was routine, and they spent the majority of their time overseas. They relied on access to foreign countries, and sanctions had threatened to prevent them from living and studying abroad. Phyo Htet Tay Za, complained to the American Embassy in a meeting on 6 November 2007 that his inclusion on the American Specially Designated

⁸⁴ Tay Za has apparently made various donations in his 'courtship' of Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, the NLD including: Tay Za owned domestic airline Asia Wings, which offered Aung San Suu Kyi 'platinum membership'. She accepted the offer, which provides free flights for life, Zaw Win Than, "Aung San Suu Kyi Gets Free Flights for Life," *The Myanmar Times*, June 21, 2013, <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/7196-daw-suu-gets-her-wings.html>; Tay Za allegedly donated to the NLD, Priyanka Boghani, "Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD Accepts Money from Junta Cronies," *GlobalPost*, January 15, 2013, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-01-15/aung-san-suu-kyis-nld-accepts-money-junta-cronies>; Simon Montlake, "Myanmar Democracy Icon Suu Kyi Taps 'Crony' Capitalists for Charity Funds," *Forbes*, January 16, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/simonmontlake/2013/01/16/myanmar-democracy-icon-suu-kyi-taps-crony-capitalists-for-charity-funds/#4bb681b32d03>; Tay Za is not the only crony courting the new government and Aung San Suu Kyi, Aung Zaw, "Rehabilitating Burma's Cronies," *The Irrawaddy*, April 24, 2015, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/rehabilitating-burmas-cronies-2.html>; Aung Hla Tun, "Suu Kyi's Party Accepts Crony Donations in Reform-era Myanmar," *Reuters*, January 17, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-suukyi/suu-kyis-party-accepts-crony-donations-in-reform-era-myanmar-idUSBRE90G0C820130117>.

Nationals (SDN) sanctions list would potentially prevent him from attending University in Australia, America, or Europe, and could “destroy his future.”⁸⁵

The Tay Za children worked to bring their foreign sensibilities to Myanmar, undertaking various businesses that relied on their father’s wealth, assets and connections. Bars were opened on land owned by their father and designed in styles reminiscent of their father’s ostentatious sensibilities. The youngest Tay Za son, Htet Tay Za, opened his first bar “Escape Gastro Bar” in 2012, his second “The Clubhouse” in 2015, and a rooftop bar “Eclipse” was planned for 2016. Tay Za’s only daughter, Rachel Tay Za, was an artist and opened a lounge bar named “Rachel” in 2016. The Clubhouse, Rachel and Eclipse were all part of the rehabilitation of the Kandawgyi Palace Hotel in Yangon, which the Tay Za family company, the Htoo Foundation, purchased in 2010.⁸⁶

Tay Za focussed on the family’s domestic relations while his children worked on the country’s foreign relations, by both developing foreign-styled bars and clubs, and by legitimising their father’s business empire for foreign partnerships. Instead of opening bars, Phyo Tay Za appeared to be following his father’s path, becoming Vice President of the Htoo Foundation after winning a lengthy legal battle against the European Union. In 2011, Phyo Tay Za avoided EU sanctions that would have frozen his European assets and added him to the designated persons list alongside his father.⁸⁷ The win effectively signalled that the new generation of the Tay Za family and other new oligarchs were free to legitimate their parent’s businesses, form lucrative partnerships with foreign companies hoping to invest in Myanmar, and solidify their families’ futures as oligarchic

⁸⁵ US Embassy Rangoon, “Tay Za’s Family Tells Their Side of the Story,” Wikileaks Cable: 07RANGOON1093_a, dated November 7, 2007, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07RANGOON1093_a.html.

⁸⁶ Hset Naing, “Burmese Tycoon Buys the Kandawgyi Palace Hotel,” *The Irrawaddy*, October 14, 2010, http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=19733; Zaw Win Than, “Htoo takes over Kandawgyi Palace,” *The Myanmar Times*, October 18, 2010, <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/4753-htoo-takes-over-kandawgyi-palace.html>.

⁸⁷ Tay Za v Council, C376-10 P.

dynasties of the business community in a changed economic environment and political economy.

Conclusion

After the passage of the Foreign Investment Law in 2012, some members of the new generation of Myanmar's business community repatriated to Myanmar and built on their parents' networks and wealth to establish themselves as oligarchs. In previous decades, their crony parents had focused on securing lucrative construction contracts or licenses through military connections.⁸⁸ By contrast, the oligarchs engaged in more sophisticated small projects and wealth displays designed to improve their social standing and indicate their independence from state patronage. The cronies entertained themselves by opening bars and restaurants, travelling, gaining exclusive educations abroad, and working for their parents' companies.

Myanmar's young oligarchs broadly conformed to the phenomenon of the new rich or new wealthy elsewhere in the Asian region, as researched in Pakistan and Japan.⁸⁹ The cronies replicated patterns of capitalist economic behaviour by establishing dynastic families and increasing economic disparity. The rise of networks of elite people and businessmen is a phenomenon that has accompanied industrialisation and capitalism across the Asian region, though each country had its own unique nuances.⁹⁰ Elite people in Pakistan have been analysed showing the importance of socialising and establishing bonds through shared transgression to business communities.⁹¹ In Japan, collegial networking and after work socialising was central to work and tended to involve sexual

⁸⁸ Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, "From Cronyism to Oligarchy?"

⁸⁹ Allison, *Nightwork*; Armytage, "The Social Lives of the Elite."

⁹⁰ Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, "From Cronyism to Oligarchy?"

⁹¹ Armytage, "The Social Lives of the Elite."

overtures in hostess clubs.⁹² In Pakistan, elite networks involved shared illicitness around alcohol and parties to indicate a group of liberal businesspeople who would do business together.⁹³

The cronies were not conceived in a vacuum, but rather they arose as a result of decades of nepotism and their parent's networks, capitalising on this history to optimise their power, independence and visibility in Myanmar.⁹⁴ The oligarchs inherited their crony parents' progressive attitudes and ways of doing business. Whereas the military men inherited a legacy of staunch supremacy and unwavering dominance, the children of cronies and businessmen inherited a legacy of transforming themselves according to the demands of the government and business climate. These children were no longer beholden to military or state patrons and free to flaunt their wealth. As such, after 2012 Myanmar's business community was regenerated and these young men were confirmed as oligarchs who were focused on wealth displays during this period.

⁹² Allison, *Nightwork*.

⁹³ Armytage, "The Social Lives of the Elite."

⁹⁴ Ford, Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein, "From Cronyism to Oligarchy?"

Chapter 4

The *Chit Thus*

The Burmese *chit thu* is traditionally translated as boyfriend or girlfriend but has taken on a variety of uses as “my love” or “beloved” by friends and family members. It is employed in this Chapter to reflect the entwined nature of young women, “love,” and relationships in Myanmar. Despite widespread social and economic changes, by 2016 Myanmar’s elite young women had failed to effect meaningful changes to the country’s gender hierarchy. They remained subjugated beneath men, and their futures remained reliant on their ability to secure advantageous marriages. Elite young women were the most marginalised group among the elite new generation. They negotiated their own place and power beneath their elite male counterparts, grappling with their historical exclusion from many traditionally masculine elite spaces and practices. During this period, while traditional attitudes regarding gender relations and marriage endured, new technological interventions assisted young women in their, ultimately futile, efforts to control their male partners.

While all elite young people who redefined their lifestyles and identities during this period faced scrutiny and judgement from certain elements of the existing generation, young women faced the harshest criticism and were most commonly accused of breaking tradition. Despite perceptions that they were destabilising the gender order, young

women remained under the control of their families and men.¹ Young women were structurally disempowered below young men, and many expressed frustration and cynicism about that disparity. Love and relationships with young men remained central to young women's virginal identities and marriage was still widely considered essential for securing their futures during this period.

To answer the thesis' research question of what was the role of elite young people in mediating social and economic change into elite composition and practice in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016, this Chapter analyses the role of elite young women. This Chapter is structured around some fundamental conditions of elite young women in the new generation, including morality, reputation, trust, infidelity, and independence. Despite widespread social and economic transformation, many elite young women remained in a morally gated community, with securing favourable marriages and raising families as their primary role in Myanmar society. Young women mediated some changes to elite practices, by incorporating some new technologies and foreign practices into Myanmar relationships. Elite composition proved considerably more durable, and they were unable to effect meaningful changes to the country's patriarchy or their position in the gender hierarchy of the elite new generation.²

Degrees of structural disadvantage

After 2010, Myanmar's elite young women increasingly reproduced foreign practices and styles, as modern and fashionable young women. There is some literature on the rise of the "modern girl" or the "fashionable woman" in the 1930s that was linked to colonial

¹ Chie Ikeya, "The Modern Burmese Woman and the Politics of Fashion in Colonial Burma," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 4 (2008).

² The concept of the "patriarchy" is used to refer to historical systems of institutionalized male control of female sexuality, in accordance with Mervat Hatem, "Class and Patriarchy as Competing Paradigms for the Study of Middle Eastern Women," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, no. 4 (1987): 818.

influences in Myanmar at the time.³ However, the terms “modern girl” and “fashionable woman,” and associated ideas are not used in this Chapter. All elite young women could be classified according to this rudimentary schema of the “modern girl” or “fashionable woman.” That is, all elite young women were fashionable modern girls: they all wore foreign fashions, spoke English, went on shopping holidays to Bangkok and Singapore, and displayed foreign tastes. The categories of modern girl or fashionable woman do not accurately describe the diversity of the composition and practices of elite young women after 2010. Instead, the types of elite young women are described as the virginal, the flirtatious, and the independent young women. The differences between these types of elite young women hinged on their relationships with young men.

The virginal girls from the gated moral community framed their lives around maintaining their reputations in order to secure advantageous marriages. Myanmar’s gender relations suffered from a preoccupation with young women maintaining their virginity, innocence, and honour. Young women maintained their virginal reputations by refusing to sleep with boyfriends before marriage, or claiming to do so. As Kathleen Coyne Kelly has argued, in her study of virginity since the Middle Ages, “virginity is contingent on cultural, not physiological, criteria, on ‘standards’ that only apply to female bodies and that serve to establish heterosexuality as the norm.”⁴ Young women in Myanmar would claim to not have sex before marriage. They claimed to do so to test young men’s commitment to them and to safeguard their reputations in the event that the relationship ended.

³ *Khit hsan thu*, fashionable woman, or *tet khit thami*, modern girl or girl/daughter of the era of advancement, as described in Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Hawai’i: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 96-119, 143-162.

⁴ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): ix.

Young men are also complicit in the virginity paradigm, as Fatima Mernissi observed following research focussed in Morocco:

“Like honour, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self-confidence. The concepts of honour and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman. It is not by subjugating nature or by conquering mountains and rivers that a man secures his status, but by controlling the movements of women related to him by blood or by marriage, and by forbidding them any contact with male strangers.”⁵

The case in Myanmar supports the literature on virginity and virgins elsewhere,⁶ and young women remained controlled by their fathers, brothers, and boyfriends. For men, including many elite young men, controlling and maintaining their wives, girlfriends, sisters, cousins, and other women’s virginity was an expression of their power and control. Many young Myanmar women acknowledged the necessity of maintaining and allowing men to control their virginal reputations. These virginal young women were focused on maintaining their good reputations as marriageable and respectable young Myanmar women. Elite young men participated in the propagation of the virginal identity through generational change, by continuing to seek these virginal young women as their girlfriends and wives.

⁵ Mernissi, “Virginity and Patriarchy,” 193.

⁶ Including: Fatima Mernissi, “Virginity and Patriarchy,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 5, no. 2 (1982); Fatima Mernissi, *Women’s Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (London: Zed Books, 1996); Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez, “Fathering Latina Sexualities: Mexican Men and the Virginity of their Daughters,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 5 (2004); Liat Kozma, “Negotiating Virginity: Narratives of Defloration from Late Nineteenth-Century Egypt,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24, no. 1 (2004); Nikki Keddie, “Problems in the Study of Middle Eastern Women,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 1979): 226; Judith Tucker, “Problems in the Historiography of Women in the Middle East: The Case of Nineteenth-Century Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15, no. 3 (August 1983).

In contrast to the virginal young women were the flirtatious young women.⁷ The flirtatious young women would frequent nightclubs and bars unchaperoned as they pleased, they would drink alcohol, and were sexually promiscuous (and would talk about it). The flirtatious young women could still secure marriages – with young Myanmar men who may have been attracted to their easy-going and adventurous natures when compared to less outgoing and uptight ways of the virginal young women, or increasingly with foreigners. The final type of elite young women, the independent young women, broke from the overwhelming reliance on marriage and young men for their futures during this period. The independent young women began to take control over their lives, taking advantage of increasing numbers of foreign university scholarships and employment opportunities.

The flirtatious young women in nightclubs and bars appeared on first glance to be a threat to traditional morality in Myanmar. However, Myanmar has a long history of polygamy and mistresses:⁸ stories of kings and princes keeping mistresses,⁹ the British colonists reportedly took multiple Burmese ‘wives’ or mistresses;¹⁰ government officials allegedly keeping mistresses or second wives in rural areas where they were sent for work and other mistresses or wives in Yangon;¹¹ and finally, there are tales of the military strongmen sleeping with actresses, celebrities, and models since the 1960s.¹² Accordingly, multiple sexual partners and infidelity did not compromise the institution of marriage in

⁷ Adrienne Evans, Sarah Riley, and Avi Shankar, “Technologies of Sexiness: Theorizing Women’s Engagement in the Sexualization of Culture,” *Feminism & Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2010).

⁸ Myanmar women were reportedly frequent clients of shamans believing their husbands had taken mistresses and no longer loved them, see Melford Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 208.

⁹ Maung Htin Aung, *Burmese Mon’s Tales* (Washington: Pariyatti Press, 2016), 54.

¹⁰ Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*, 120-142; Andrew Selth, *Burma, Kipling, and Western Music: The Riff from Mandalay* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017); Nalin Jayasena, *Contested Masculinities: Crises in Colonial Male Identity from Joseph Conrad to Satyajit Ray* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 117-118.

¹¹ Mya Sein, “The Women of Burma.”

¹² Fieldwork notes, January 2013.

Myanmar. The flirtatious young women, while deplored by the virginal young women and other conservative individuals, did not challenge the authority of young men.

The new generation of young women inherited a complicated history of gender inequality, forced to grapple with a moment of social transformation while negotiating their position in a problematic gender hierarchy.¹³ Chie Ikeya argues that Myanmar women are the subject of a “persistent and monolithic cultural stereotype” perpetuated by postcolonial scholars. Ikeya argues that postcolonial scholars depicted Burmese women as experiencing high status and autonomy, compared to the “traditional” subordinate position of women elsewhere in Southeast Asia.¹⁴ In the Myanmar context, the image of the Burmese woman was both autonomous and liberated but inescapably socially and politically differentiated from their male counterparts. Analysing the new generation of elite young women adds complex narratives and personal dilemmas of young women, to work against what Ikeya describes as “oversimplified and problematic” conceptualisations of gender relations and hierarchies.¹⁵ Despite this complexity, ultimately it is confirmed that elite young women continued to largely conform to Myanmar’s gender relations and hierarchies and were unable to effect social change.

In Myanmar, young women’s identities seemed to be reliant on relationships with young men. As Henrietta Moore argues, individuals have competing subject positions within various discourses, saying “[d]iscourses are structured through difference, and thus women and men take up different subject positions within the same discourse, or rather, the same discourse positions them as subjects in different ways.” The subject positions

¹³ *Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices and Gender Equality in Myanmar* (Myanmar: The Gender Equality Network, November 2015).

¹⁴ Ikeya, “The ‘Traditional’ High Status of Women in Burma,” 51.

¹⁵ Nicholas Cheesman, “Review: Reconfiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma,” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 28 (March 2012), http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue28/cheesman_review.htm

of the elite new generation of Myanmar are multiple and complex and yet, gender remained an inescapable determinate of social position and power.¹⁶ Young women were more consistently and predictably positioned in subordinate roles to their male counterparts.¹⁷

In Myanmar, the changing social and economic conditions offered new opportunities for elite young women but did little to undo decades of gender inequality. In a study of Mediterranean societies, Jane Schneider argued that in moments of social change “[c]oncern for honor also grows... when there is no stable relationship between units of power and precisely delimited patrimonies.”¹⁸ Schneider goes on to observe that “concern with honor arises when the definition of the group is problematic; when social boundaries are difficult to maintain, and internal loyalties are questionable.”¹⁹ As established above, women’s bodies and men’s ability to control those bodies and their virginity, especially through moments of social uncertainty, seems to be an attempt to wrest control of a situation that is otherwise out of men’s control.

The literature on the treatment of young women in times of national political instability also suggests that young women face increased regulation mandated by the state to shore up national stability.²⁰ Narratives of nationalism include poignant metaphors of gender, family, sexuality, and vulnerability. These stories work to construct ideas of women, men, femininity, and masculinity that deny agency to women and allocate responsibility for their protection to men. Social norms are frequently made real through the regulation of

¹⁶ Jennifer L. Berdahl, “Harassment Based on Sex: Protecting Social Status in the Context of Gender Hierarchy,” *Academy of Management Review* 32, no. 2 (2007), 641-658.

¹⁷ Moore, *A Passion for Difference*, 57.

¹⁸ see Jane Schneider, “Of Vigilance and Virgins: Honor, Shame, and Access to Resources in Mediterranean Societies,” *Ethnology* 10, no. 1 (1971).

¹⁹ see “Of Vigilance and Virgins: Honor, Shame, and Access to Resources in Mediterranean Societies,” *Ethnology* 10, no. 1 (1971).

²⁰ McCarthy and Menager, “Gendered Rumours and the Muslim Scapegoat.”

the body, with gender an important factor in how the body is politicised and made vulnerable.²¹ As anthropologist Veena Das explains, modern society places obligations on the citizen and their bodies dependent on their gender: men should be prepared to violently fight and die for their nation and women should bear and raise “legitimate” children for the nation, who will, in turn, carry out these obligations.²² From 2010 to 2016, elite young women in Myanmar were subject to these kinds of obligations and their experiences support the argument that in times of national political instability young women are denied agency and pressured to maintain the gender status quo by continuing to focus on marriage and raising families.

The morally gated community of virgins

Immersive, qualitative social insights of one elite young woman, Chloe, reveal how the elite virginal young women conformed to existing gender structures while working to mediate some new developments into their practices. In 2013, Chloe was the 25 year old daughter of a military father, who was often away for weeks at a time. Chloe’s mother stayed home to look after Chloe and her younger sisters. For Chloe and her friends, maintaining their reputations while meeting eligible young men was a constant preoccupation. The young women deployed many techniques to carefully balance these two things, including limiting exposure to the nightscape, carefully curating outfits, enlisting chaperones, and adhering to curfews. From 2010 to 2016, these young women patronised a niche market of “dayclubs” that allowed them to maintain their reputation by socialising during the day. The growth of dayclubs also indicated the acceptance and importance to young men of meeting these respectable young women, which is analysed

²¹ Kim Turcot Di Fruscia, “Listening to Voices: An Interview with Veena Das,” *Alterities* 7, no. 1 (2010), 140.

²² Veena Das, “Violence, Gender, and Subjectivity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37 (2008).

further below. Once in relationships, these young women continued to tread the fine line between maintaining their good reputations and socialising, with the added oversight of their boyfriends.

Chloe had a small and often volatile friendship group. She had a stable group of childhood and school friends who were almost sycophantic in their adoration of her. It seemed important to Chloe that her friends did not encroach on or threaten her status as the most attractive and popular of the group. As for “best-friends,” Chloe would go through very intense and rather short term close friendships. All Chloe’s friends would be similarly focussed on finding a boyfriend, and eventually getting married and building a family with a suitable partner. Their behaviours were carefully curated to maintain their reputations as marriageable young women.²³ A high point of their social calendar would be going to a bar, nightclub, or concert approximately once a month.

Going out at night would involve a careful deliberation and protracted negotiations with their parents. As they were often only allowed out for a limited time, generally a couple of hours, they would carefully decide when, where, and how to use that time to maximise their status and exposure without compromising their reputations.²⁴ They would plan their evenings to include chaperones, who would take the form of parents who would wait in the car park or a brother or trusted cousin who would accompany them, and strict curfews in order to receive their parents’ permissions. Young women did not resent these constraints but often welcomed them as safeguards to their reputations.

²³ Poeht Kyaw, “A Jamaican in Burma: Sexism,” *Meanmarshmallows* (Wordpress, 8 June 2016), <https://meanmarshmallows.wordpress.com/2016/06/08/a-jamaican-in-burma-sexism/>.

²⁴ See Matthew Fennessy, “Marriage, Modernity, and ‘Manner’: A Burmese-Buddhist Woman’s Agency in Contemporary Yangon, Myanmar: An Ethnographic Portrait,” *GISCA Occasional Paper Series* 8 (Göttingen: Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, 2016).

Young women seemed to recognise that they were relatively powerless to overthrow or diminish the necessity of a good reputation to securing their futures. They also seemed to accept the value and desirability of securing a good marriage, and worked to achieving this goal. With this as their goal, and a good reputation as essential to achieving that goal, many elite young women would not resist or try to circumvent their chaperones or curfews. Despite accepting these constraints, the young women would often complain about the double standard of their captivity compared to young men's complete freedom. However, they seemed to recognise the futility of any efforts to establish some degree of parity with their male counterparts. They were operating from a position of relative powerlessness compared to young men, and the potential long term damage that they would risk by eschewing their chaperones or curfews appeared to outweigh the potential rewards. This ultimately came down to their acceptance of marriage and family as a desirable goal in life.

One night, Chloe and her friends organised to attend a "Full Moon Party" which was loosely styled on Thailand's notorious Full Moon parties. The party was at the Kandawgyi Lake outdoor amphitheatre and featured an array of mainstream Myanmar hip-hop artists, including Bobby Soxer, Bunny Phyoe, Hlwain Paing and others. Chloe's mum dropped her off at the entrance to the event at 6 pm, and waited in her parked car while Chloe went to the concert. Chloe and her friends congregated at the back of the concert, away from the sweaty tightly-packed crowd watching the performers on stage. The performers were not the key attraction for the young women who were there to, as one said, "meet cute guys." Chloe and her friends laughed and chatted with one another about what their "type" of man was, between the Korean-style manicured young men or "famous" models and artists.

A group of young men who were friends with Chloe lingered nearby, occasionally breaking into the women's group to flirt with Chloe or to joke with one of her friends. There were other groups of young men and women at the back of the concert engaged in similar courtships. There seemed to be some veiled competitiveness and standoffishness between the various groups of young women standing at the back, and the different groups did not socialise beyond some small talk and superficial compliments. Around 8 pm, Chloe had organised for her and her friends to accompany some of the young men to a bar for some dinner and drinks, before her curfew of 9.45 pm. They walked to the car park, got into Chloe's mum's car and drove to meet the young men at the bar. The joking and flirting continued at the bar, until Chloe left promptly at 9.45 pm, with no argument or fuss.

Chloe and her friends welcomed their curfews and boundaries. One day Chloe had organised to go to the nail salon near her house, but she forgot to tell her mum. She called around midday when she woke up to say that because she had forgotten to tell her mum she wanted to go out, her mother had already left to do errands and had locked Chloe in the apartment. Chloe said she was disappointed she would not be able to socialise but did not express any surprise that her mother had locked her inside the apartment. Her mother would always lock Chloe and her 21-year-old sister in the apartment when she went out and left them home alone. Chloe said that, like her curfews, she did not mind her parents being strict on her as it meant that she was respected and held in high esteem by her social group, who knew her parents were strict.

Chloe said she did not push to go out more, to be unchaperoned, or to go out later because she was worried that she would be mistaken for a prostitute or other people would think she was not virtuous. Young women often said they were concerned about being mistaken for a prostitute in nightclubs, and that if they ever went to nightclubs

they would be careful to act modestly, only drinking one or two drinks in an evening, and adhere to the various restrictions placed on them by the family and boyfriends. Chloe and her friends wore revealing tight clothing and high heels, and they would speak flirtatiously with young men in person, in text messages, and on social media. However, they were very careful never to let the way they dressed or their flirtation damage their good reputations.

Chloe was in a relationship with an elite young man from the crony social group and had been in two serious relationships in the past. Despite having dated three young men for over a year each, declaring their love for each another, and even getting matching tattoos with one of them, Chloe maintained that she did not have sex with them and she was still a virgin. Chloe and many other elite young women researched insisted that they were virgins and that they would not have sex before they were married. Chloe faced scrutiny and judgement from her new boyfriend about past boyfriends and male friends. This scrutiny included a forensic examination of her Facebook account. At the beginning of a relationship young lovers would exchange their Facebook and other social media passwords, and they would cull their online friend lists of their past love interests or young people considered “bad influences.” Chloe and her boyfriend regularly signed into one another’s accounts, checked each other’s conversation history, and removed any questionable friends. They would also habitually go through one another’s phones, checking call records, photos, and messages. Any deceitful behaviour would result in huge arguments requiring weeks or even months of apologies and gifts to get past, or resulting in the breakup of a relationship.

The virginal identity for the *chit thu* was practiced for reasons of gendered domination. For the *chit thu*, the virginal identity was the new generation update of the good Myanmar girl. The virginal identity arose out of necessity, to distinguish an elite young woman as

unchanged by the process of generational change and proving they had not succumbed to the moral laxity that accompanied the incursion of foreign ideas. The need to be scrupulous in relationships and out of them was necessary to ensure favourable future relationships, and yet in a relationship young couples would need to be completely devoted to one another. Chloe's boyfriend's scrutiny and disapproval of her past relationships reinforced the importance of Chloe maintaining her virginity. Young men undermined the veracity of these virginity claims when they said that even scrupulous and respectable young women would have sex with their boyfriends before marriage. Whatever the truth, the image of virginity was essential for ensuring Chloe and her friends were considered steady-girlfriend- and future-wife-material for the kinds of young men they pursued.²⁵

Dayclubs

A peculiar business developed to cater to young women focused on maintaining their reputations while still wanting to socialise. Dayclubs were popular in Yangon during this period allowing young women and men to mingle during the day, unimpeded by night curfews or parental oversight. Dayclubs are not unique to Myanmar, though the reason for their popularity was not the 24-hour party lifestyle promoted by their European counterparts, instead they were popular in Myanmar as they catered to young women otherwise curtailed by strict curfews and a restricted range of permitted activities.²⁶ Between 2012 and 2014, Yangon had a number of dayclubs that recreated the experience of a nightclub with their blacked out windows, flashing lights, smoke machines, DJs,

²⁵ In other countries "virginity testing" is a tradition practice, see Dilek Cindoglu, "Virginity Tests and Artificial Virginity in Modern Turkish Medicine," *Women's Studies International Forum* 20, no. 2 (1997); Ronika Mudaly, "Shattering and Reassembling Hypersexual Moments: Girls Indulging in the Pursuit of Pleasure," *Sexualities* 15, no. 2 (2012).

²⁶ May Sit Paing, "Rangoon's Dayclubs Attract Youths, Aggravate Authorities," *The Irrawaddy*, August 27, 2013, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/rangoons-day-clubs-attract-youths-aggravate-authorities.html>.

dance floors, and bars. Young women would tell their parents they had school, university or were going to meet friends for innocuous daytime events and instead would head to dayclubs, often getting changed in cars or bathrooms before arriving.

Once at the dayclubs, activities would be almost identical to nightclubs albeit more innocent. There were no prostitutes or as much intoxication, and in general the patrons were younger. To the uninitiated, these clubs lived up to expectations of nightclubs, while older young men who also frequented nightclubs would admit they only came to dayclubs to meet young women, not because they enjoyed the venues. Dayclubs were the younger cousin of the nightclub, catering to a need for daytime courtship locations and an outlet for adolescent misbehaviour without ever quite achieving the same notoriety or status as the nightclub itself. The prevalence and importance of these dayclubs indicated the conflict between what young people wanted and what they were allowed to do, of newly developing lifestyles rubbing against the limits of the country's social and moral standards.

Young women's alcohol consumption, at dayclubs and elsewhere, can be seen as an extension of the gender roles of wider Myanmar society. In conversations, young men framed their excessive consumption as masculine and dangerous. Young women, on the other hand, shied away from heavy drinking as it was considered unbecoming and a marker of poor morals.²⁷ When young women consumed alcohol, they would often appear drunk after a small amount, half a beer or half a shot of spirits. At a dayclub with Chloe, she had one beer during the afternoon and complained that she was drunk, giggling and leaning into her boyfriend. Then, less than an hour later, she met her mother in the car park and proceeded to drive the car home with no issues. Young women

²⁷ Poe Han Thar Kyaw, "The Exasperation of a Modern Myanmar Woman," *Frontier Myanmar*, October 3, 2016, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-exasperation-of-a-modern-myanmar-woman>.

seemed to use alcohol to demonstrate their reliance on young men and their need for their protection.

Alcohol consumption played into wider relationship dynamics between young men and women, with their apparent inability to tolerate alcohol showing their fragility and femininity. Young men, on the other hand, appeared to emulate the role of the powerful protectors, who drank to excess but still maintained their alpha male status, able to drive and protect their women and friends. The evocation of narratives of trust centred on gender lines through the differing consumption of alcohol and the enactment of gender roles under the influence, revealed the degree to which young women were expected to trust young men to care and provide for them.

As with alcohol, young women were careful not to be seen as smokers, as smoking was not seen as an appropriate behaviour for a virginal young woman.²⁸ It was almost unheard of for a virginal young woman to be a regular smoker. Chloe and her friends, most of whom would have the occasional cigarette, said they were careful when and how much they smoked due to concerns that if they did so too much or too comfortably they would be mistaken for someone with low morals, such as a prostitute. When Chloe and other young women did smoke, they would exaggerate their inexperience and discomfort, holding cigarettes awkwardly, coughing a lot, or scrunching up their faces in apparent displeasure at the taste and smell. Young women in Yangon who did smoke regularly tended to be those who had gone to university overseas or were associated with the underground hip-hop group analysed in Chapter 5. Young women used their smoking as a signal of their modernity, their independence, and female empowerment.

²⁸ Moore, *A Passion for Difference*, 57.

The virginal young women did not want to emulate those qualities, as reflected in their careful and curated smoking performances.

Promiscuity and sex

In the suffocating and invigorating atmosphere of Myanmar relationships, trust issues indicated a point of rupture between existing ways of doing things and social changes rendering those ways of doing things irrelevant or ineffective. The social transformation of Myanmar forced the new generation to confront social changes regarding relationships and to negotiate new ways to manage them. For young women who wanted to get married and raise a family with an elite young man, increasing nightlife options and technological developments made infidelity easier and trust harder to hold. These young women had some methods for resisting the damage these developments represented to their relationships, deploying some tactics that inconspicuously protected their interests. While the threats to the traditional value of marriage and family increased during this period, the values remained important and relatively stable. Those “threats” are considered markers of social change and indicators of an increase in flirtatious young women in Yangon during this period.

Trust issues plagued the relationships of Myanmar people of all ages.²⁹ Monique Skidmore observed that in the 2000s, as a result of decades of fear and divisive military techniques, the Myanmar people were “a nation of individuals unable and unwilling to trust each other.”³⁰ These trust issues lingered after 2010 and combined with the relaxing of morals, the proliferation of options for expression, and greater social opportunities. As a result, the dynamics of relationships in Myanmar became considerably more

²⁹ Khine Thant Su, “In Places of Military Dominance, Women Can Never Be Equal,” *The Irrawaddy*, August 4, 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/interview/places-military-dominance-women-can-never-valued.html>.

³⁰ Skidmore, *Living Silence in Burma*, 16.

uncertain after 2010. Before 2010, elite young women were almost without exception kept at home or under family control before marriage. Since 2010, however, the number of elite young women living away from their families or in families that were relaxing strict controls increased. Also, this period saw the exponential increase of Facebook use, which represented the introduction of what became a key site for beginning, conducting, and ending relationships.³¹ Importantly, Facebook could be used in the home and undermined the effectiveness of keeping young women at home as a way to prevent them from flirting with young men. In response to this uncertainty, young couples relentlessly questioned one another and demanded constant proof of a suitor or partners' trustworthiness and fidelity.

During this period, some elite young women were eschewing the virginal constraints and acting more openly promiscuous. These promiscuous young women were sometimes deplored as a result of the corruption of traditional values, but actually have a long legacy in Myanmar.³² The more promiscuous young women of the new generation existed on a spectrum of relationships with young men, ranging from platonic friends to one-night stands, mistresses, lovers, and "friends with benefits."³³ Promiscuous young women, were, as a group, less coherent than the virginal young women. Instead of being united around a shared goal (like the virginal young women were around marriage and family)

³¹ By mid-2016, Myanmar had 9.7 million active Facebook users (approximately 19 percent of the population) and nearly 90 percent of those Facebook users were in Yangon or Mandalay, Catherine Trautwein, "Facebook Racks up 10M Myanmar Users," *Myanmar Times*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.mmtimes.com/business/technology/20816-facebook-racks-up-10m-myanmar-users.html>; The amount of Facebook users is linked to the surge in internet users in the country. Since 2014, when Myanmar telecommunications industry liberalised and allowed new providers, the number of internet users has increased from 2 million to more than 39 million in 2016. Aung Kyaw Nyunt, "Ministry Puts Mobile Penetration at 90 Percent," *Myanmar Times*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.mmtimes.com/business/technology/21466-ministry-puts-mobile-penetration-at-90-percent.html>.

³² Mya Sein, "The Women of Burma."

³³ In China, these women have been dubbed 'gray women', reflecting their "liminal position between proper women who belong to the morally upright and legitimate "white" world of marriage and prostitutes who belong to the illegitimate and immoral "black" underworld of sex work." These women include mistresses and second wives. Osburg, *Anxious Wealth*.

they were primarily united as a group because they fulfilled the role of objects for young men's sexual attention and flirtations. These young women were not sex workers, though there were certainly many sex workers in nightclubs. The promiscuous young women, aside from the obvious difference from sex workers that they were not paid for sex, had considerably more control over their lives and their sexuality was not the result of low social status.³⁴ Rather these young women tended to come from middle-class families, were often away from their families in Yangon for university or work, and were less focussed on attaining an advantageous marriage. They tended to be less restrained and modest than the virginal young women. They would go to bars and clubs freely and were less demanding in their relationships with young men. Where virginal young women stayed home, repetitively calling their boyfriends and asking where they were and what they were doing, these young women could be found socialising with other young women and men.

The more promiscuous young women appeared to be less concerned about the reputational risks of spending time in clubs and bars, drinking alcohol,³⁵ and having open sexual relationships with young men, than the virginal young women. The promiscuous young women would go out without a chaperone or a curfew, and often had control of their own finances. They would sometimes go home with young men for one night stands and they did not always pursue their sexual partners to form long-term relationships or marriage. The promiscuous young women could quickly develop bad

³⁴ A 2005 study estimated there were between 5000 and 10000 female sex workers and approximately 100 brothels in Yangon: Luke Talikowski and Sue Gillieatt, "Female Sex Work in Yangon, Myanmar" *Sexual Health* 2 (2005). This was supported by a 2015 estimation: Si Thu Thein, Tin Aung, and William McFarland, "Estimation of the Number of Female Sex Workers in Yangon and Mandalay, Myanmar," *AIDS and Behaviour* 19 (2015).

³⁵ The laws surrounding drinking are almost non-existent in Myanmar with no minimum drinking age. There is however a law which remains, from the 1928 Excise Rules, which prohibits women from serving alcohol in bars or restaurants. Htoo Thant, "Govt rejects minimum drinking age," *Myanmar Times*, June 14, 2014, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/10676-govt-rejects-minimum-drinking-age.html>.

reputations and may be ostracised by other young people, in person and on Facebook. These women were chastised and called “prostitutes,” “sluts,” “gold diggers,”³⁶ or “whores.” Myanmar’s history and current tabloids include stories of young women, generally models or actresses, who were the mistresses or sexual partners of elite men, including military leaders. These women are often depicted as using their sexuality for financial and professional gains.

Some elite young men, who had an array of young women to choose from, would maintain a stable and long-term relationship with one of the virginal young women and engage in other secret relationships with promiscuous young women. Long-term relationships with virginal young women were seen as leading to marriage and families. Marriage and families were important to elite young men as well as young women, however, it was not the only defining feature of their futures. Their sexual philandering achieved a different set of goals and lived up to their own and others’ expectations of them as masculine and dominating young men. Further, keeping relationships secret and effectively deceiving young women seemed to contribute to their reputations as masculine and powerful young men. The pursuit of these two types of relationships – the stable long-term, and the sexual short-term – by young men was a pattern that predated 2010 in Myanmar. The continued value and pursuit of marriage despite increasing opportunities for casual sexual relations indicated the enduring value of marriage and family through generational change.

Declaring love was sometimes an innocent and juvenile expression of a feeling, but it was could also be the first stage in a long process of deceiving young women into and

³⁶ Rumours as cited on the questionable Myanmar Celebrity gossip website (with photos and videos): “Model Wutt Hmone Shwe Yi, Gold Digger”, <http://www.myanmarcelebrity.com/2011/06/model-wutt-hmone-shwe-yi-gold-digger.html>, and a YouTube video showing Wutt Hmone Shwe Yee sitting on Sai Sai’s lap caused considerable scandal in 2012 and was viewed over 200,000 times, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0J2w1RIjGDQ>.

throughout long-term relationships that often spanned years. Within days of becoming a couple, young people would proclaim their love for one another. In 2013, a young man dismissed this practice as just a means to an end, claiming young men said “I love you” early in relationships because “we have to say it before a girl will sleep with us.”³⁷ This was a simplistic answer that suggested young Myanmar men’s declarations of love were simply pragmatic means of getting sex. However, extended fieldwork indicated that early and constant declarations of love achieved more than just sex. Young women demanded effusive declarations of love and trust from their boyfriends. The primary method for courting young women, amongst the majority of Myanmar young people, was to overwhelm young women with attention, make gushing declarations of love, and shower them with presents. Young women would not accept a single or genuine commitment but would require a boyfriend to continually demonstrate their love and reassure them about their fidelity and trustworthiness. Whether the deception was of a potential long-term girlfriend or for a more fleeting relationship made some difference to the lengths a young man was willing to go to in order to convince them and wait for reciprocation of feelings and rewards of sexual relations. The way young women responded to these overtures depended on the type of young woman they were: with those who upheld the virginal identity being more challenging to attain, and therefore more sought after as purer, virginal, and worthy of more of a young man’s time and attention.

Young women were faced with complex and well established male strategies, including elaborate lies and façades, for leading a double life. Elite young men would act as devoted boyfriends to their girlfriends, while acting as sexually accomplished players to their male friends.³⁸ Friendship groups were integral to the efficient telling of lies with male friends corroborating each other’s lies. These lies were observed from both sides of

³⁷ Fieldwork notes, July 2013.

³⁸ Peter Metcalf, *They Lie, We Lie: Getting on with Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2003).

the relationship: young women talked about what their boyfriends told them, and young men talked about their strategies for maintaining multiple relationships. Young men in friendship groups seemed intuitively aware of the lies their friends would be telling and if asked a question would instinctively lie in the way they assumed was required in the situation. They had told these lies so many times that they became second nature and no longer needed overt corroboration or crafting. For example, when a young woman asked a potential suitors friends if the young man had a girlfriend, the friends would answer in a vague yet reassuring manner, along the lines of “he only loves you” or “I have never seen him so in love as with you.” Further, by telling lies that increased the status of one member, the groups would effectively increase the whole group’s prestige.

There were several important considerations in elite young men’s strategies for maintaining effective lies around multiple girlfriends. The first was choosing potential girlfriends disconnected from the others’ networks. Young men would brag that the secret to having various girlfriends was to minimise the chance that they would run into any of their other girlfriends on dates, or that the young women would talk to one another, or have mutual friends that would uncover the duplicity. This separation often meant a geographical separation, with some young men saying they had a downtown girlfriend, a midtown girlfriend, and an uptown girlfriend in Yangon, or they would have a girlfriend in Yangon and a girlfriend in Singapore. Choosing young women from different friendship groups would minimise the chances they would find out about one another. Deleting text messages and call logs was an apparent and ritualistic necessity, which would be done with a careful precision – not deleting too many messages or calls to make their phone history look suspicious. Many maintained multiple Facebook accounts, or would carefully calibrate the “view settings” around posts and what different young women (and their friends) could access. Multiple phones and phone numbers also

aided in these deceptions. Most importantly though, was having convincing friends who were well-versed in how to corroborate their lies and stories instinctively. Questions of trust pervaded almost all aspects of young people's relationships, with even the act of putting on a seatbelt warranting a response of: "Don't you trust me?" The strategy for maintaining the façade of trust across multiple relationships was to overwhelm with words and acts that spoke to trust, in the hope that by communicating a view that trust was imperative it would be all the more difficult to refute.

The majority of young men's infidelity and deception occurred during the night when virginal young women were locked away in their homes. In the early hours of the morning in Yangon, young men could be seen leaving nightclubs with prostitutes and young women headed to hotels. If prostitutes were required, young men could order them dispassionately from club staff in the early hours of the morning. The young men would then drive to hotels and pay for rooms for a few hours. Some young men would go to hotels without young women because they could not return to their family homes at such a late hour without reprimand. The hotel of choice would vary, depending on location and room availability, but most hotels in Yangon accepted this kind of patronage. Some hotels more specifically catered to it and would be relatively empty until these late-night guests arrived. Others hotels that primarily catered to foreign tourists and businesspeople would fill any remaining rooms with these young men. Young men would also hire hotel rooms during the day for planned sexual encounters with their girlfriends and sexual partners.

New technologies as proof of love

After 2010, young women began to engage with new technologies that flowed into the country as the telecommunications infrastructure developed and smartphone use became

widespread. The advent of new technologies and behaviours accompanying social changes after 2010, introduced many new methods that young couples would use as proof of love. Young women's authority over their boyfriends was controlling and demanding, seeking to continuously monitor and know where and what each other was doing. The power dynamic was a continuation of and relied on, the treatment of unmarried young women by the family unit in Myanmar. Young women were often confined to their homes, and their activities monitored closely by their parents, while young men were given relatively free reign over their daily entertainments. Young women frequently complained of what they called the double standard and lamented that they could not do anything about it. Despite having little apparent control or freedom in relationships, young women commanded a level of power and authority through their expectations in relationships. The ways that young women incorporated foreign practices into their relationships changed the nature of elite practice during this period, but in a way that did not ultimately challenge the persistent value of trust and fidelity in young relationships.

Young women had the power to place demands on and control their boyfriends' lives, despite young men's ability to otherwise do as they pleased. As a young man once said about one of the gangsters, "he can get whatever the fuck he wants in this bitch."³⁹ Despite being able to get whatever he wanted, he still took persistent phone calls from his girlfriend and constantly placated her about his whereabouts and trustworthiness. A young man's ability to have multiple sexual partners while maintaining a consistent long-term relationship was considered a testament to his masculinity. Further, young women's desires were "noncommodifiable and autonomous" rendering them more valuable and highly sought after.⁴⁰ They were living up to their peers' expectations about their sexual

³⁹ Fieldwork notes, November 2013.

⁴⁰ Osburg, *Anxious Wealth*, 74.

prowess while appeasing their own, and their parents, more conventional wishes for stability and family.

After the initial declarations of love and courtship, once in a relationship young couples employed several tried and tested methods for proving one's devotion. These methods included getting matching tattoos or tattoos of each other's names, Skyping through the night while sleeping, exchanging Facebook passwords, unremittingly accounting for their movements, and never-ending phone calls, text messages and Viber chats. Young men and women justified this behaviour as proof of devotion, with one young woman saying, "if your girlfriend is not more and more psychotic every day, she is not in love."⁴¹ While the behaviour seemed overwhelming and illogical at times, it could also be viewed as calculated and following a set trajectory of disproving infidelity – guilty until proven innocent appeared to be the default when it came to trustworthiness. The primary concern was voiced as cheating and infidelity, though the goal seemed to be the complete control of one another. Trust was not earned and then maintained, but rather had to be proven and then constantly reaffirmed.

With a sharp increase in Internet penetration around 2014,⁴² young women began to frequently monitor their boyfriends through the night by sleeping with their Skype video chat on, to confirm they were in their beds alone and not out partying.⁴³ Skyping through the evening may have addressed the immediate concerns of philandering, but it did little to address underlying trust issues. Chloe had broken up with her ex-boyfriend after she

⁴¹ Young Myanmar female's private Facebook status, July 2013.

⁴² In 2013, internet penetration was less than 2 percent, by 2014 it was around 12 percent, and by 2016 it was at 22 percent of the population. Freedom House, "Country Profile: Myanmar, Freedom on the Net 2016," <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/myanmar>.

⁴³ Genevieve Bell, "The Age of the Thumb: A Cultural Reading of Mobile Technologies from Asia," *Knowledge, Technology, & Policy* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2006); Lin Proitz, "Intimacy Fiction: Intimate Discourse of in Mobile Telephony Communication Amongst Young Norwegian People," in *A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, ed. Kristof Nyiri (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2005).

woke up while Skyping him one night, insisted that she had heard him receive a message, and was certain it was from his ex-girlfriend. Despite her boyfriend's insistence that he had not received any messages or calls, and his attempted refutation with evidence of no messages on his phone, she refused to believe him and said she "just knew" he was lying.⁴⁴ The relationship ended in spectacular fashion, with emotional Facebook messages and photos of Chloe self-harming, a practice relatively common among young women and explored further below. The couple were reunited a few days later when Chloe agreed to take the young man back, after he had proved his devotion by profusely apologising and buying her numerous expensive gifts.

Young women admitted that they accepted that young men were often unfaithful to them, but that they were spared public shame because the young men kept their indiscretions out of their social groups. Young men's philandering primarily took place in the nightscape of Yangon, and young women and their social groups did not learn much of what happened in these spaces as they existed mainly in the dayscape. If an indiscretion did come to the attention of a girlfriend, the young woman would quickly and ferociously confront the young man involved. Elite young men had almost complete control and power in relationships, but they too chose to maintain the convention of fidelity, even if in appearance only.

If a young woman found out her boyfriend had been unfaithful or a potential suitor had deceived her, the responses could often be extreme and disturbing, including self-harm. Young women would post photos of self-harm on Facebook with captions excoriating the young men in order to publicly shame them. Chloe and her girlfriends once posed for a photo, where four of them held their forearms in a circle displaying their cuts and scars for the camera. They posted the photo on their Facebook accounts with captions that

⁴⁴ Fieldwork notes, January 2013.

stated that they were sisters, had all been scorned by young men, and were “silly” for having hurt themselves over young men. Other young women would often comment on these photos, either sharing their own stories of self-harm and how they had been scorned or with stories defending the young men saying what they had done was wrong but that they were sure they still loved the young women. The narrative of the scorned woman is anchored in Myanmar’s history, including in the legal system, and these disturbing displays and instances of victim-blaming were relatively routine.⁴⁵

Young men and women were not embarrassed about posting their self-harm, and others did not express shock, surprise, or concern at seeing the posts. The only person who Chloe said had expressed concern about her cuts was her mother who had been very upset after she saw the cuts on her arms. When asked about the practice, young men said they thought it was immature and attention seeking behaviour, but did not seem overly concerned about it. Only one instance was found of a young man cutting himself and posting photos to Facebook, when his girlfriend left him. He seemed to be using the cuts and their display on Facebook in an attempt to get his girlfriend back, by showing her how upset he was about losing her. This motivation was slightly different to that given by young women, who tended to justify their cutting as expressions of hurt in order to make their unfaithful boyfriends feel remorse that they had hurt them through their behaviours.

⁴⁵ For more on the treatment of women and men by the legal system, see Nicholas Cheesman, “Bodies on the Line in Burma’s Law Reports, 1892-1922,” in *Law, Society and Transition in Myanmar*, eds. Melissa Crouch and Tim Lindsey (Oxford and Oregon: Hart Publishers, 2014); Melissa Crouch, “Constructing Religion by Law in Myanmar,” *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2015); Melissa Crouch, “Promiscuity, Polygyny, and the Power of Revenge: The Past and Future of Burmese Buddhist Law in Myanmar,” *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 3, no. 1 (May 2016); Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*; Chie Ikeya, “Colonial Intimacies in Comparative Perspective: Intermarriage, Law, and Cultural Difference in British Burma,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 14, no. 1 (2013); McCarthy and Menager “Gendered Rumours and the Muslim Scapegoat.”

Both the young man and the young women's cutting was designed to be viewed by others, in order to make others feel or do something. The practice seemed to be a worrying development accompanying the improving telecommunications infrastructure. Without the platform or the now widespread connectivity of the population, such displays could only reach a far smaller audience. Before the internet and smartphones became commonplace, maybe a story of a young woman cutting herself would have spread through rumours and first-hand witnesses. However, after 2010 with the proliferation of the Internet, smartphones, and computers, the potency of this practice increased with the ability to project an image of one's cut and bleeding arms both to the offending young man and to a much wider audience.

Another practice which became commonplace in the relationships of the elite new generation was matching couples tattoos. Matching tattoos, and contemporary tattooing (as opposed to more traditional Myanmar forms of bamboo tattooing) was a common practice amongst the new generation of young people in Yangon but was practiced in different ways by the various types of young people. Tattooing was an example of the importation of a foreign practice, accompanied by the existing structures surrounding it, rather than the adaption or evolution of a traditional practice. That is, while tattooing had a long history in Myanmar, the types of tattoos popular amongst the new generation were not stylistically similar to traditional Myanmar tattoos. The meanings, motivations, designs and status of this kind of tattooing reflected the importation of international systems of tattooing as a gentrified cultural practice.⁴⁶ Tattooing retained a level of stigma and was primarily undertaken by more rebellious young people. By 2016, tattooing had gained prominence as an art form that enjoyed popularity amongst young people.

⁴⁶ Karen Bettez Halnon and Sandra Cohen, "Muscles, Motorcycles and Tattoos: Gentrification in a New Frontier," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6, no. 1 (2006).

Matching relationship tattoos were a favourite tattoo style for elite young women and their partners. Of the four social groups of young men in this thesis, the gangsters were the most receptive to getting matching tattoos with their girlfriends. The other three elite groups of young men more commonly adopted tattooing as an art form, particularly the underground rappers featured in Chapter 5. These kinds of matching tattoos seemed to appeal most to those young people who were mistrustful and operating according to the restrictive heteronormative gender norms in Yangon. For the most part, as analysed in Chapter 2 and this Chapter, the gangsters and the young women were fixated on trust and marriage, which explains their proclivity for marking their bodies with tattoos in order to prove their devotion.

Young people's relationship tattoos were mainly of partners' names. Interestingly, these names tended to be Romanised versions of Myanmar names. Instead of tattooing someone's name in Myanmar script, young people would choose the Roman script iteration. A possible explanation for this practice was that because Facebook and phone contacts appeared in the Roman script, this was the way young people came to visualise their names. They rarely wrote their names in Myanmar script, but instead consistently saw and wrote them in Roman script. The use of the Roman script was an interesting instance of the influence of technology eroding a Myanmar practice as important as peoples' names. While some young people had their partner's names tattooed, other couples got matching or complementary tattoos, for example, one having a key and the other a lock. It was not uncommon for young couples to get some form of couples or relationship tattoo in the first months of dating. With trust proving elusive for many young people, rendering someone's name into skin for life appeared to become a tempting way to prove love and try to attain the Myanmar dream of marriage and family.

And yet, even this permanent mark did not earn young men or women much reprieve from suspicion.

As established already, partying and casual sex was not a new development since 2010, however, there were some new developments in elite young people's contraceptive practices. Elite young people's contraceptive practices point to a tension between the persistence of certain outdated attitudes despite the availability of sexual education and protection. During fieldwork, in the hours after sunrise young men would leave hotels and drive to pharmacies known to sell the morning after pill. They would buy the morning after pill for the young women they had slept with the night before, who waited in the cars, before returning them to their homes. The ritual of buying the morning after pill was an extension of the nightly ritual surrounding taking young women to hotels for casual sex. The practice extended the decisions of the night before into the morning and raised some important relationship questions. The regularity with which the morning after pill was used indicates a central and concerning element of Myanmar relationships – young people would refuse to use condoms, except with sex workers. Both young men and women would express insult if a girlfriend/boyfriend suggested using one, with the implication that they were a sex worker or that they had sex with other people.

Sex education around contraception was deficient and sexual practices were reckless – condoms and the contraceptive pill were rarely used, with the “pull out” method and morning-after pill preferred. Some young men and women said that at the beginning of a new relationship, both partners would get tested for STD's before having frequent unprotected sex. As established above, young men would frequently have multiple sexual partners, so these initial STD tests were of limited utility. Young men and women said that some would fall pregnant from these lax contraceptive practices and that young men would then generally insist on abortions. Sexual education and practices were areas where

liberalising moral standards were quickly exceeding basic education. For example, while young men who were sexually active would get regularly tested for STDs, their knowledge of STD symptoms and treatments were limited. The morning after pill was also widely assumed to be safe to use daily, with young women using it as their usual contraception for years at a time.

The decision by some elite young men to maintain outdated sexual practices, despite knowing them to be dangerous indicated an alarming disregard for their sexual partner's health but also that they were more concerned to appear faithful, by not using condoms, than to admit their infidelity and protect their girlfriends' health. For most elite young women, as they did not admit to having sex and therefore did not discuss their contraception, their reasoning can only be inferred, possibly as continuing to operate according to the stigma of condom use. Elite young women may have been acting from a desire to believe their boyfriends were faithful to them. In general, young women seemed to have a lower standard of sexual education about STDs and contraception than young men.

Overall, the elite young women incorporated new technologies and practices into their lives. However, elite young women were unable to use these practices to change elite composition in any meaningful way. While they were able to place new demands on young men, to sleep through the night on Skype and to get matching tattoos, they were unable to effect any change to the underlying trust issues and infidelity. Further, with their unwillingness to overcome the stigma associated with contraceptives and condoms, elite young women showed that they were unable to effect changes to their own attitudes, even when it had serious health consequences. While the virginal and the promiscuous young women were meaningfully unchanged during this period, there was a smaller group of young women who were capitalising on new opportunities to study

abroad and were taking advantage of new career prospects: the independent young women, analysed next.

Imagining life “elsewhere”

The independent young women were engaging with the social and economic changes in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016 to challenge marriage as the central goal of their lives. The independent young women took advantage of opportunities that were becoming more widely available and acceptable to their communities: to go abroad for university and pursuing careers. The independence displayed by these young women appeared to be transgressive compared to the virginal young women focused on marriage and the promiscuous young women focused on relationships with young men and leisure. The practices of the independent young women were introducing foreign ideas of what young women could do into Myanmar. As Steven Miles has argued, young people are often incorrectly assumed to operate on the “cutting edge” of social change.⁴⁷ Miles argues instead that young people are “rarely radical and are much more likely to be in the habit of enforcing the status quo.”⁴⁸ The new gender roles and opportunities that the independent young women were propagating in Myanmar, were drawn from foreign television, movies, and internet depictions of young women, rather than some radical reimagining based on Myanmar gender roles.

One of Jessica Dada’s friends once described her as a caged monkey: overflowing with energy and pacing around her Myanmar prison rattling the bars. Born and raised in Myanmar, Jessica was the daughter of a famous Myanmar author. She wrote some novels herself before turning to modelling in 2012 at the age of 21. She said her parents were

⁴⁷ Steven Miles, “Young People, Consumer Citizenship and Protest,” 101.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

initially strict about her curfews and she was not allowed to go out at night, but eventually they supported her dream of being a model and realised she needed to build her networks. She said she wanted to change the way models were perceived in Myanmar and increase the respect for her profession. In her view, Myanmar's modelling industry was behind the times and that "it sucks to be a model here." Modelling was not a new practice in Myanmar in 2010, however, Jessica was pushing the industry to accept her androgynous look, which was more aligned with international modelling standards. Jessica said "people here aren't really ready for my look. I'm too androgynous: I don't do cute." After establishing herself as a successful model, Jessica diversified into hosting events and took up a professional singing career. She released her first music single independently in October 2015.⁴⁹ Jessica's friendship group was replete with the socialites of Yangon and foreigners. She frequented various trendy bars and clubs on weekends. Her Facebook activity was full of disparaging "girl power" jokes and photos of nights out and promotional events.

In addition to challenging the modelling industry and its attitudes towards young women, Jessica said her appearance and independence also challenged young Myanmar men. In 2014, Jessica spoke about her experience of relationships. She said she thought she "intimidates people, Burmese guys especially" and instead socialised with a mix of repatriates and foreign expatriates. Relationships were not a preoccupation for Jessica, although she did have a lot of male expatriate friends. On nights out, Jessica socialised and joked with her friends, paying little attention to flirting or meeting potential boyfriends. Jessica drew a lot of attention as an attractive and outgoing young woman, but finding a boyfriend or dating never appeared to be a motivation for her going out.

⁴⁹ Heather MacLachlan argues that even in music young women are constrained in their roles, allowed to be singers but not to play instruments, saying that young women "are the inheritors of a custom that has, for some centuries now, exercised a taboo on women participating in instrument playing," *Burma's Pop Music Industry*, 20.

She did not have a boyfriend and she was always solely focused on building her career. Her thoughts and plans for the future were not conditional or centred on marriage or a family. Her views were not radical by international standards, but they were different to the Myanmar status quo for young women.

Once, she lamented “why was I born here? I always wonder how my life would be different if I were born somewhere else.” Imaging “somewhere else” was a common trope for Jessica, and she would often discuss how she thought she would be free and happy if she lived outside of Myanmar. Despite this dream of fitting in somewhere, Jessica said she would not move overseas because she did not want to leave her family and friends. When it was pointed out that she may have been less successful as a model in Singapore or elsewhere where more young women were already representing the androgynous look, she clarified that “it’s not that I want to move away, I just wonder what it would be like to belong somewhere and fit in.”⁵⁰ Jessica seemed to embody the tension in Myanmar during this period, between the plethora of new opportunities and the continued oppression of young women according to the enduring gender hierarchy.

Independent young women were beginning to challenge the status quo of how young Myanmar women were meant to behave. Jessica’s friends seemed to fuel her thoughts of “elsewhere,” including her best friend who called herself “Barbie Boom” and went to university in Australia. While Jessica was choosing to remain in Myanmar and work to change perceptions from within, Barbie Boom represented the other route for elite young women to be independent during this period by attending universities overseas.⁵¹ Plans for education and career goals subsumed marriage.

⁵⁰ Fieldwork notes, November 2013.

⁵¹ Since 2010, the number of scholarships on offer to Myanmar people from foreign universities have increased. For example, in 2010, Australia restarted its AusAID scholarships for Myanmar students for the

Jessica and Barbie were not attempting to dismantle the institution of the Burmese family: they were just following a foreign status quo. Platonic friendships with young men and expatriates, freedom of movement at night, independent international travel, and the pursuit of careers became possible. Independent young women were emulating more progressive gender roles they experienced, witnessed, and imagined existing elsewhere. They would explain their choices and negotiate with their parents for their independence and freedom. Part of their role in Myanmar's social transformation was to help explain and engage with the existing generation. As elite people, they were afforded greater freedoms and opportunities, and were somewhat insulated from the harsher edges of Myanmar prejudice and judgement. They were also able to spend their time improving themselves and taking risks, as their parents had the financial capital to support them, and they did not have to focus on getting married in order to secure future support from a husband. As elite young women they were able to exert greater control over their lives and choices, and their actions pointed to a growing tension between what some elite young women wanted to do and what they were allowed to do in Myanmar.

Conclusion

Elite young women embraced foreign goods but remained structurally disadvantaged in Myanmar's unequal gender hierarchy. The elite young women described in this Chapter may have been musicians, business women, models, artists, or students. But they were first and foremost daughters, sisters, girlfriends, and wives. Their gender remained the

first time in 20 years, see Stephen Smith, *Ministerial Statement* (Canberra: House of Representatives, February 8, 2010); Hong Kong offers a variety of scholarships to Myanmar students, the merits of which are analysed in William Yat Wai Lo and Felix Sai Kit Ng, "Connectivity For Whom and For What? A Normative Dimension of Education Hub," *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 38, no. 3 (2016); Many other countries increased the number of Myanmar student scholarships on offer after 2010, including China, US, UK, and Singapore, Myanmar Insider, "Booming Education Market in Myanmar," *Myanmar Insider* (June 2015), <http://www.myanmarinsider.com/booming-education-market-in-myanmar/>; *Myanmar Opening Up to Foreign Investment and International Education* (ICEF Monitor, 28 November 2015).

primary characteristic of their identities and determinate of the opportunities open to them during this period, as reflected in the categorisation of them together in this Chapter. Ultimately, these young women remained beholden to the existing gender hierarchy in Myanmar society, which carried through the social and economic changes of the period. While some young women questioned or expressed disdain for the gender hierarchy, they were relatively powerless to enact any significant changes to it. Further, these young women continued to have respect for their parents and their families, and they were not in open revolt against or disdainful of their parent's wishes.

The majority of elite young women aspired to and emulated a virginal image. Virginal young women were focused on maintaining a virginal reputation. A virginal reputation remained important for securing a favourable marriage to an elite young man. Elite young women maintained virginal reputations while incorporating the trappings of modern women. Virginal young women engaged with foreign cultures by dressing in foreign fashions, spending considerable time in malls and beauty salons, and investing in beauty and makeup products. Aside from fashion and makeup, virginal young women partook in new forms of socialising, including going to bars and nightclubs. Importantly though, they would only go to bars and nightclubs under strict conditions, including drinking minimal if any alcohol, being accompanied by chaperones, and adhering to strict curfews. By maintaining these strict conditions, virginal young women were able to socialise and engage with new opportunities while protecting their reputations.

Virginal young women's reputational concerns extended into their courtships and relationships with young men through the continued preoccupation with trust and fidelity. Trust was the subject of much negotiation to adjust to social transformations and respond to increasing threats. Technological development and improving telecommunications infrastructure, including smartphone connectivity and Internet

penetration, both helped and hindered in young lovers' complex proofs of love and trust in one another. Young women developed some strategies to validate love and minimise threats. Young men's acceptance of these intrusive demands indicated the continued importance of trust, marriage, and family in Yangon through this period. Some of the practices of conducting a relationship changed, but the underlying motivation continued to be the long-term goal of marriage and family.

Trust issues and infidelity plagued relationships. This Chapter has described how some of the technological developments that flowed from the transformation of 2010 were incorporated into relationship strategies around trust and infidelity. Young women used technological developments to further and continue existing practices. Mistrust and scrutiny of their partner's activities and movements was elevated to new dimensions with the proliferation of mobile phones and more reliable phone connectivity. The increased online connectivity provided young women with the ability to communicate more freely from the confines of their homes. Again, this development was a slight change that did not radically transgress existing gender hierarchies. Elite young women may have been able to call their friends and partners almost anytime and from anywhere, but they were still doing so from behind the physical and mental gates of their moral community.

Independent young women eschewed the obsession with love and the focus on securing a favourable marriage and pointed to the tension between the existing attitudes to young women and the dreams young women had for their lives. Independent young women valued their independence and strove for lives not contingent on men, marriage, and families. In many ways, independent young women threatened the traditional Myanmar family and marriage more than promiscuous young women. Independent young women were beginning to focus on their educations, going to university abroad, and pursuing careers. When at home, the independence and freedoms they had enjoyed overseas

resulted in them acting more independently than the virginal and promiscuous young women. They would drive themselves to dinner with their friends or go to bars and nightclubs as they pleased without adhering to the proper vestments of chaperones and curfews. Importantly, they were often at bars and clubs to socialise with their friends and not to meet young men. Some of these young women were from oligarchic families and had similar outlooks to the cronies analysed in Chapter 3, including emulating the “entrepreneurial” identity, while others became artists or musicians. Whatever they pursued, they represented a tension between what young Myanmar women were expected to do and what they were trying to do during this period.

Elite young women possessed complex social capital and inhabited an uncomfortable position in Myanmar’s hierarchy. Elite young women of the new generation developed new identities while retaining some resolutely Myanmar qualities.⁵² The majority continued to be defined by and to exist in relation to their male counterparts, while a minority cast off this subjugation and pursued independence. Elite young women were not a coherent or homogenous group, however, ultimately, they all served to reinforce and reproduce existing attitudes to women. Elite young women represented the tension between the continuity of certain social values related to marriage and virginity, against the influx of new flows of people and information that challenged those values.

⁵² Cheesman, ‘Review: Reconfiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma’.

Chapter 5

The *Mite Deh* Guys

Yangon's underground hip-hop rappers were *mite deh* (cool). They wrote lyrics that brokered between the luxurious elite world and the struggle of the streets of Yangon. The way they interspersed Myanmar language with English slang was indicative of their role as negotiators between the foreign and the local. These rappers had achieved elite status as a result of the cultural capital afforded to them from their fame and notoriety, rather than financial or legacy capital. This Chapter analyses what that cultural capital was and how these young men were using their elite status to promote social change by negotiating with the existing generation.¹ These young men played a unique role actively negotiating international cultures into the local context for members of the non-elite population, including other young people. They were at the front line of the new generation, translating what the political transition of the country meant for their society. Through their role as negotiators, they shaped their country's values and culture. This Chapter analyses three ways they were making their mark on Myanmar: by actively increasing the value of creativity and working to undo the effects of decades of censorship; by opposing *copy thachin* (copy songs) and raising the value of authenticity in popular culture; and by unseating ingrained conservative views and discrimination regarding stigmatised physical markers considered deviant, including tattoos.

¹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

This Chapter provides an alternative interpretation to Ward Keeler's 2009 article on Myanmar hip-hop. Keeler's article marks an important shift in the way hip-hop in Myanmar is considered by academics, with its analysis highlighting how hip-hop can be more than a political message. Keeler asks "what's Burmese about Burmese rap?" and ultimately argues against those "many commentators who emphasize the particularities of rap outside the West," by failing to identify much "to distinguish Burmese rap from other forms of rap elsewhere."² He dismisses the nuances of local expressions of rap, saying "even if what they choose to oppose may be specific to their particular place, it still looks as though they take on the trappings of hip-hop's radical assertions of autonomy and moral indignation."³ These radical assertions seem to be a sticking point for Keeler, who argues that "no matter what may have preoccupied the rappers they model themselves on, Burmese rappers use rap to present themselves in the light they care about: as rich, cosmopolitan, and modern, in accordance with the ways international mass media define (or represent) such terms."⁴ Keeler's identification of the commonality across various locations of hip-hop expression is interesting, but he fails to make a convincing case for dismissing the uniqueness or validity of expressions of hip-hop in Myanmar.⁵

On an optimistic note, Keeler says the pleasurable aspects of hip-hop in Myanmar should not be unappreciated, saying "one can only hope that anthropologists have not become so hardened in their political commitments as to dismiss such pleasure as insignificant."⁶ Hip-hop did provide a significant amount of pleasure and joy in Myanmar, however, the significance of camaraderie, creativity, and collective marginalisation held far greater

² Keeler, "What's Burmese about Burmese Rap?"

³ *ibid*, 11.

⁴ *ibid*, 6.

⁵ Ela Greenberg, "The King of the Streets: Hip-hop and the Reclaiming of Masculinity in Jerusalem's Shu'afat Refugee Camp," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 2, no. 2 (2009).

⁶ Keeler, "What's Burmese about Burmese Rap?" 13.

bearing for the artists themselves. Keeler may have set out to analyse Myanmar rap beyond its political messages but he fails to complete his analysis objectively making what he himself calls a “condescending judgement” of Myanmar rap saying that the “Burmese could be said to have grasped the shell rather than the essence of rap and hip-hop.”⁷ This Chapter provides the nuances that Keeler’s article dismisses and highlights the role of the underground rappers in shaping social change in Myanmar.

Before beginning the analysis, it is necessary to provide some context and background of hip-hop in Yangon. Hip-hop is a culture that encompasses a range of artistic forms, including the musical MCs, rappers and music producers, the visual graffiti artists, tattoo artists, photographers and music video producers, and the stylistic fashion designers and retail outlets.⁸ Since the 1990s, hip-hop artists in Myanmar have been divided into two categories: the underground and the commercial mainstream. Underground artists are the primary group analysed in this Chapter. Underground artists in Myanmar operated without official sanction or permission for their song lyrics or music videos. These artists did not previously apply to the censorship board (the Press Scrutiny Board was disbanded in August 2012) for lyric and content approval prior to the release of music and videos.⁹ They operated in the unofficial realm of Myanmar, reliant on social media and online downloads for music distribution and live performances for income. Commercial hip-hop artists were a reference point of inauthenticity and commercialism which the underground artists framed themselves against as the authentic purveyors of the streets and the struggle of hip-hop. Commercial hip-hop artists were often bored rich young people from the gangster or crony groups who turned to hip-hop as a hobby or outlet. Underground hip-hop artists are treated as a coherent group negotiating social

⁷ Keeler, “What’s Burmese about Burmese Rap?” 6.

⁸ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

⁹ Fuller, “Chief Censor in Myanmar Caps His Red Pen.”

change for Myanmar, separate from the commercial artists who more appropriately belonged to different social groups, such as the gangsters or the cronies.

Hip-hop has been around in Myanmar since the 1990s, with ACID, Theory, NS and Too Big considered the “first generation” of Myanmar hip-hop.¹⁰ The first generation of hip-hop artists tended to be more political than contemporary artists in Yangon. This could be attributed to the general opening of the country, the official end of censorship and the greater access to foreign styles. Contemporary underground hip-hop artists included J-Me and G-Tone, who were both members of Myanmar Hip-Hop Association (MHA), PBD Hood, and Ar-T. In addition to these artists, there were a number of organisations, businesses and individuals who made up the hip-hop cultural scene, including photographers, skate boarders, and tattoo and graffiti artists.

Underground artists did not apply for or receive official endorsement or approval. Underground artists did not have a single musical or lifestyle preference beyond this lack of official sanction. Many underground artists did not make punk or hard-core rock and roll music, instead many created love ballads. The music and lives they led were not deviant according to Western standards, but their creativity and youthful imaginations had been considered a threat to state stability and order. They were independent and creative, and they faced a government unwilling to approve their art and a population unable to accept their life choices. This group of young men were the most ethnically and religiously diverse of Yangon’s elite new generation: united by their shared pursuit of creativity and art rather than their ethnicity, religion, or wealth. Hip-hop allowed them to express their social anxiety and marginalisation.¹¹ Since 2010, these young men cautiously welcomed change and dogmatically pursued their fame as popular culture leaders.

¹⁰ Ye Yint Htay, “Three Generations in 15 Years.”

¹¹ Halifu Osumare, “Beat Streets in the Global Hood: Connective Marginalities of the Hip-hop Globe,” *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 24 (Spring 2001).

Underground hip-hop artists were elite because of cultural capital afforded to them by their fame or infamy and were not necessarily from wealthy or powerful families. These young men had been waiting and hoping for the social change Myanmar experienced after 2010, and worked to translate the foreign world for the wider Myanmar audience through their music.

While some observers focus on politically motivated popular culture in Myanmar, including punk music and political rap, this Chapter instead considers hip-hop as a legitimate expression by a group of young men searching for some meaning and identity within their society and the world.¹² In Yangon after 2010, hip-hop continued to develop beyond political statements or expressions of teen angst, and the young men who were drawn to hip-hop warrant a nuanced analysis to acknowledge their role as key negotiators in Myanmar's social transformation. That is not to discount that some of these young men were, at times, fiercely political and many were actively involved in 2015 election campaigns.¹³ While some had been arrested and incarcerated for their non-conformist behaviour that had been perceived as a threat to the military's control in the past, they were not necessarily overtly political people.¹⁴ They grew up in an atmosphere of

¹² Online media articles include: Naomi Gingold, "Why Burmese Hip-Hop is Inevitably Political," *The Economist*, May 31, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2016/05/international-music>; Sheel R. Patel, "Burmese Protest Music: A Brass Key to a Once Locked Nation," *The Artifice*, December 30, 2014, <https://the-artifice.com/burmese-protest-music/>; Melanie de Klerk, "Politics, War, Freedom and Music in Myanmar," *Global News*, November 8, 2015, <https://globalnews.ca/news/2325475/politics-war-freedom-and-music-in-myanmar/>.

¹³ Yangon rappers contributed songs and went on the campaign trail with the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi in the 2015 elections: Mason Adams, "How Hip-Hop and Country Music Helped Aung San Suu Kyi Win Myanmar's Historic Democratic Election," *Vice: Noisey Online*, November 30, 2015, https://noisey.vice.com/en_au/article/rmjxb8/myanmar-election-music; Gingold, 'Why Burmese Hip-Hop is Inevitably Political'.

¹⁴ Yan Yan Chan, Zayar Thaw and G-Tone, are among the most famous hip-hop artists in Myanmar who have been arrested: "Burma's Hip-Hop Under Attack," *The Irrawaddy*, May 2008, http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=11646; Jared Downing, "Turn Up the Volume," *Frontier Myanmar*, August 27, 2015, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/culture/turn-up-the-volume>. "Scum" a punk rocker and star of the 2014 documentary 'Yangon Calling – Punk in Myanmar' was incarcerated for drug offences: Alexander Dluzak, "Rotten, Vicious Times: Burma's Punk Scene Fights Repression Underground," *Spiegel Online*, February 24, 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/rotten-vicious-times-burma-s-punk-scene-fights-repression-underground-a-817185.html>; Shwe Yee Saw Myint, "Escaping the Opium Nightmare: Drug Rehabilitation," *The Myanmar Times*, February 25, 2013,

heightened political tensions in which even banal behaviour could be perceived as a threat to military rule and therefore national stability.¹⁵ These young men, even those incarcerated, were not necessarily protesting or planning a revolution, but many were daring to teach themselves how to make original music, to study the foundations of hip-hop culture, and to generally be young people. Prior to 2010, these actions constituted acts of defiance and deviance against a conformist state. In this context, despite the official lifting of censorship, their continued self-censorship is analysed to reveal its continued pervasive effect on their ability to travel and perform freely, give interviews with media, and promote their music.

Ian Condry, a preeminent scholar of Japanese hip-hop, argues that hip-hop diasporas reveal a trajectory of globalisation that do not follow that of cultural styles driven by major corporations, such as Disney, McDonalds, or Walmart. Instead, “hip-hop in Japan is illuminating precisely because it was initially dismissed as a transient fad by major corporations and yet ultimately took root as a popular style nevertheless. This shows that globalisation is not driven solely by powerful media companies, but travels through alternative paths as well.”¹⁶ Myanmar’s underground hip-hop is another case study of how initially unprofitable, unsponsored, and unpatronised cultural styles were pursued by individuals working without state or corporation support to become one of the most popular styles in Myanmar. As Condry says, “although popular music styles travel on the winds of global capitalism, they ultimately burn or die out on local fuel.”¹⁷ In Myanmar, the local fuel was an affinity with hip-hop’s messages of persecution and an appreciation

<https://www.mmmtimes.com/special-features/161-youth-2013/4228-escaping-the-opium-nightmare-drug-rehabilitation.html>.

¹⁵ David Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 290-293.

¹⁶ Ian Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalisation* (USA: Duke University Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁷ Ian Condry, “A History of Japanese Hip-Hop: Street Dance, Club Scene, Pop Market” in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*, ed. Tony Mitchell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 222.

for the messages of authenticity espoused. These fuels sustained the fire of Yangon's hip-hop artists and conferred them with elite status. As elite young men, the artists were able to actively negotiate new morals and values for the new generation in Myanmar, including valuing creativity and authenticity, and combatting persecution.

Subversive cultural capital

Young underground hip-hop artists gained entrance into the elite realm by acquiring the relevant cultural capital. Cultural capital was attained as a result of many factors, including hip-hop knowledge and skill, leading to a significant fan base and therefore fame. A hip-hop artist's fame was measured through demand for them to feature on commercial artists' songs, requests to perform at large concerts at home and abroad, and by the size of their social media following. The source of their fame increasingly included characteristics that they were previously ostracised for, such as tattoos. The qualities that made a young man a leader of an underground hip-hop crew was more complex than they first appeared. The research on hip-hop in Myanmar has largely conflated the underground and the commercial artists, and dismissed the very qualities that distinguish a poseur from an authentic, which is one of the central distinctions for hip-hop globally and historically. For the authentic underground hip-hop rapper in Myanmar, freedom of expression was more than the freedom of political expression but rather the freedom to be creative without persecution. Understanding the distinction between "official" censorship and community meted vigilance is central to unpacking how these elite young men were changing what it meant to be elite and young in Myanmar.

Cultural capital provides the conceptual framework for dealing with the phenomenon of social selection and illuminates processes through which social hierarchies are

maintained.¹⁸ Cultural capital is institutionalised beginning in childhood through the institution of the family.¹⁹ Throughout life, an individual engages with various institutions and acquires certain preferences, attitudes, and behaviours that constitute their cultural capital. This cultural capital adapts and changes as a young person moves through life, understanding and adapting to their surrounds and changing circumstances. The term is used to acknowledge how this capital is acquired and its relationship to social mobility, but also because it allows for contrast against financial capital that had previously dominated the elite space of Yangon. A young hip-hop artist could attain enough cultural capital through their hip-hop skills and size of their fan base to be considered elite young men from 2010 to 2016 in Myanmar.

These young men attained their elite positions in Yangon based on contested and subversive cultural capital, which the new generation of elite young people was working to elevate during this period. Further, the artists' reliance on the wider public as an audience for their art and music was problematized by their continued existence on the boundaries of what was socially acceptable. Compared to the gangsters in Chapter 2 and the cronies in Chapter 3, these young men were not insulated from their communities. They did not have the connections or the financial means to be able to remove themselves from a situation if they took something too far and were persecuted for it. They did not have the wealth or familial connections that afforded the security and safety from law enforcement and the wider population that the other elite groups enjoyed. Accordingly, these young men cultivated their "fans" and pandered to their audience,

¹⁸ Michele Lamont and Annette Lareau, "Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Development," *Sociological Theory* 6, no. 2 (1988), 155.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

while simultaneously negotiating the boundaries of how they could live their lives in Yangon.

The way these young men engaged with the media and journalists shows why the foreign media had a biased and homogenised view of them, but also revealed their ability to tailor their messages to different audiences.²⁰ In one interview, a young hip-hop artist sat with American journalists and told them about how “fucked” his country is, how repressive and evil the military was, and how he wanted to change everything.²¹ The story he told was not unique or notable, except that it was a story that he only ever told to foreign media. Away from foreign media, he was not politically engaged, he had grown up in a fairly liberal middle-class family, he did not drink, smoke, or take illicit drugs, and he had never been in trouble with law enforcement. This narrative of the repressed and rebellious underground artist was deployed to the foreign media. In turn, the foreign media, journalists, and some academics who only spent a limited amount of time with these young men appeared to accept and repeat this narrative.

Off camera, these young men were fighting far more difficult barriers than the Press Scrutiny Board’s approval or state repression: they were dismantling the pervasive self-censorship and community vigilance that permeated the population. Despite the end of the official sanction of tattoos on television, interviewers still refused to interview young men with visible face or neck tattoos. This appeared to be because they were concerned that they may offend their viewers and that they could still face government punishments for showing them. One day in late 2013, a TV crew covering a hip-hop concert

²⁰ Some more nuanced articles on the underground also emerged: Downing, “Turn Up the Volume”; Nathalie Johnston, “Myanmar Hip-Hop Meets the World,” *The Myanmar Times*, July 29, 2013, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/home-page/143-editor-s-pick/7647-myanmar-hip-hop-meets-the-world-2.html?limitstart=0>.

²¹ Fieldwork notes, May 2013.

interviewed the artists after the show. They refused to interview one of the performers with neck tattoos. The artist lamented “it’s so unfair, I’m not a bad guy and I thought this shit was changing, but it’s harder to change these people than the government. I don’t blame them, they’re just scared, but it hurts.”²² When asked how they were trying to change peoples’ attitudes they said they saw themselves as the long-term negotiators between their country and the future, alternative cultures, and freedom of expression.

Sometimes the simplicity and seeming innocence of what these young men wanted came out in the strangest of situations. One day in 2014, on the side of a road in suburban Yangon, a heavily tattooed young man was smoking a cigarette leaning against a taxi waiting with some friends for another friend to come out of his family apartment. People walking by stared at him, people sitting at teashops glared at him over their cups, and the sisters of the young man whose house he was waiting outside walked past and hurried inside with barely a nod to Albert. Albert just started singing a little tune that sounded like a children’s song very quietly – “please don’t judge me, I won’t judge you” – repeatedly until the group were all in hysterical laughter. After this day, Albert often sang this little song to make light of a situation when he faced judgement and scrutiny. The little song, although it was intended to be humorous and light-hearted, spoke to a kind of deep sadness and simple desire for harmony and acceptance. The other young men found the song hilarious, suggesting they all understood the sentiment, having all faced similar judgement and that they too wished for a simpler life without judgement. Many underground artists would say they felt they had no choice but to live their lives authentically, to just “be themselves,” and keep hoping that their country would one day change enough to accept them.²³

²² Fieldwork notes, November 2013.

²³ Fieldwork notes, November 2013.

In August 2012, on the day the Press Scrutiny Board was dismantled, it became apparent that these young men spent their lives avoiding the state and the law rather than confronting or disregarding it.²⁴ That morning, the author walked into a downtown recording studio where a group of young underground rappers practiced and recorded their music. Arriving at around 10 am, the young men had already been in the studio for a couple of hours. The young men ordered some snacks and coffee from the teashop downstairs, and sat on the floor in the sunshine that poured in from the windows. The author was excited to talk to them about the end of the censorship board, what it meant to them, and if they felt like they had won a small victory. Instead, when asked if they had heard that the Press Scrutiny Board was dismantled they all stared blankly. None of them had heard and no one really cared. One of the group, Maung explained that it would not change anything for them, since they never applied for permission anyway, their fans did not buy their music from official shops, and that the clubs and events that booked them were from the underground music scene and did not care about the censorship board.²⁵ It became apparent in the weeks that followed that the end of official censorship did not change much for these young men: interviewers kept refusing to film those with tattoos, their neighbours glared at them disapprovingly, and their parents still had to “explain them” to their concerned family and friends.

Following the lifting of official censorship and the embrace of the mainstream, young men’s “underground” status became even more vital for their cultural capital and fame. In addition to the effect of decades under repressive military rule, these young men continued to draw on this period to increase their notoriety and authenticity as hip-hop artists who had struggled for their music. Underground hip-hop in Yangon had cultural

²⁴ Thomas Fuller, “Chief Censor in Myanmar Caps His Red Pen,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/22/world/asia/myanmars-chief-censor-is-closing-his-office.html>.

²⁵ Fieldwork notes, August 2012.

cache: it was *mite deb* or cool because of its perceived subversiveness. While artists had been rapping and dressing in confrontational ways since the 1990s, after 2012 it became possible and fashionable to include them in official songs and music videos. After 2012, artists with large tattoos, including neck, arm, and face tattoos, found themselves in high demand to appear in commercial hip-hop and popular music video clips. Underground artists and other deviant-looking young men were featured in mainstream songs, bringing their subversiveness to otherwise commercial pop songs. It became cool to feature “authentic” underground artists in otherwise commercial music and mainstream advertising.

While the censorship board had been disbanded, there were still legal restrictions on what artists could produce. The *Electronic Transactions Law 2004* included up to 15 years jail time for “acts by using electronic transactions technology” that were deemed “detrimental to the security of the State or prevalence of law and order or community peace and tranquillity or national solidarity or national economy or national culture.”²⁶ References to peace, tranquillity, and national solidarity were common in Myanmar’s laws, many of which were intentionally vague so as to allow broad interpretations as required by the state and law enforcement.²⁷ After 2012, young hip-hop artists continued to be censored by the legal system, although artists did not enjoy any clarity or certainty about how or if certain laws would be applied to them.²⁸ As one artist said,

“Now, we just don’t know. I mean before we would just release our music on the Internet and knew there were risks, but they were small because no one up there was listening to it. Or we could apply to the censorship board and we would

²⁶ The Union of Myanmar, *Electronic Transactions Law 2004*, The State Peace and Development Council Law No. 5/2004 (30 April 2004).

²⁷ Wiles, *Saffron Shadows and Salvaged Scripts*.

²⁸ MacLachlan, *Burma’s Pop Music Industry*.

know before we got in trouble. Now, we are releasing albums where they can see and hear it [on publicly released CDs and DVDs], and we don't know if we will get in trouble. It's scary."²⁹

Rather than try to predict the unpredictable, these young men lived their lives avoiding the official realms and scrutiny.

Collective creativity

Creative young men seemed drawn to hip-hop for its underlying messages of struggle and valuation of authenticity. Since the 1990s, young men have produced authentic hip-hop in Myanmar. Underground rappers grappled with the meaning and importance of authenticity. Their ideas of authenticity were devised in conversation with Myanmar society. Their music and lifestyles pushed the boundaries of morality and conservative values, while maintaining a strong message of place and life in Myanmar. While underground hip-hop in Yangon could be seen as a site of collective marginalization, the artists were united and driven by something more than their shared discrimination.³⁰ They were brought together by their creative impulses and their drive to produce challenging art. While they may have been persecuted for their race, religion, and socio-economic status on the streets, inside the studio and among their friends it was their creativity that defined them.

In Yangon, the underground hip-hop scene was broken down into various groups, sometimes called crews, gangs, or families.³¹ Rappers were generally the focal point of

²⁹ Quoted in Menager, "Law Fuckers, Cultural Forgers and the Business of Youth Entitlement in Yangon, Myanmar," 208.

³⁰ Osumare, "Beat Streets in the Global Hood."

³¹ These groups are called '*famairi*' or families in the Japanese hip-hop scene, see Condry, "A History of Japanese Hip-Hop," 237.

these hip-hop groups, which would include photographers, videographers, sketch artists, graffiti artists, tattoo artists, skate boarders, and fashion designers. The addition of a new member to an established group was a serious decision likened to finding “a new family member.”³² These groups spent almost all their waking time together: recording, performing, eating, drinking, and socialising together. Some of the underground “families” were biologically family, including G-Tone and his brother in their group Cyclone, Ye Naung from PBD Hood and his brother Arkar who operates Arkar Productions from an office that also housed PBD Hood’s recording studio, and J-Me and his family’s film business.

The hip-hop family did not discriminate based on religion or ethnicity. In August 2013, when communal tensions were high in Yangon, the Muslim family of a music producer, Mya Aye, and his friends – three lapsed Buddhists, one atheist, one Christian, and one practicing Buddhist – sat down for Eid UL Fitr. In March 2013, there was a fire in a downtown mosque and orphanage that killed thirteen children and communal violence was at an incredible pitch.³³ Mya Aye had tried to organise a safe house for his mother and sister, as they lived downtown and he was worried for their safety. As he said, “I can take care of myself if something kicks off, but I cannot protect them here,” and more worryingly, “I am ready to fight and defend my family.”³⁴ Allegedly, cars of Buddhist agitators were driving around Muslim areas of downtown Yangon warning residents that mobs were coming to riot in their streets. Months after these tense and divisive times, with the effects still felt across the country, this hip-hop family from diverse religious backgrounds sat down together, undivided, to celebrating a religious holiday that was

³² Fieldwork notes, October 2014.

³³ “Burma Mosque Fire Kills 13 Children,” *The Guardian*, April 2, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/02/burma-mosque-fire-kills-children>.

³⁴ Facebook private messages to the author, March 2013.

important to Mya Aye and his family. In a country consumed by communal violence and the pursuit of national unity in the face of uncertainty and social change, these young men were united instead by their shared pursuit of music and creativity.³⁵

Underground rappers made an important contribution to the diversity of the composition of elite young people in the new generation during this period. The diversity of Myanmar hip-hop community reflected the country's diverse, complex and problematized ethnic compilation.³⁶ As a social group, the hip-hop artists and their collaborating cultures were the most diverse that were researched in Yangon. Made up of a mix of Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Bamar, Karen, Chinese, Korean, of both sexual orientations, and with links to Australia, England, Singapore, China, America, and Israel, they were representative of the diversity of their country as a whole. This diversity was a break from the previously unrivalled domination of the elite space by members of the Bamar ethnic group and Buddhist religion. Further, as communal violence gripped the country, these young men were offering an alternative to that discrimination, modelling how young people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds could coexist without conflict based on their difference. Conflict existed between different groups as a result of musical rivalry and territory claims, however, it was rarely about racial, religious or sexual orientation.

Music styles were not the cohesive factor amongst Yangon's hip-hop artists. Within a group there may be very diverse music preferences, from rock and roll, to punk, to thrasher, to commercial pop music, of either foreign or Myanmar origin. Again, it was obvious that what drew collectives together and kept them united were their similar

³⁵ Carol M. Motley and Geraldine Rosa Henderson, "The Global Hip-Hop Diaspora: Understanding the Culture," *Journal of Business Research* 61 (2008).

³⁶ Tony Mitchell, *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 10.

outlooks, compatible skills, and shared valuation of creativity and authenticity. There were some rivalries based on artistic differences and territorial claims, which seemed to increase as the underground scene became more popular and larger. One artist observed that “everyone’s starting to roll around acting like gangsters.” As the young artists became more high profile and popular, they felt pressure to start acting like “real” rappers, which could include fighting and acting like a gangster. These elite young men confirmed what appeared to be increasing instances of fighting between groups outside clubs, refusals to perform at the same events as rival groups, and expectations of loyalty amongst their friends preventing their friendships with other groups. While these tensions increased after 2010, such conflict between groups was not a central aspect of Yangon’s underground hip-hop scene, which remained characterised by more collaboration than rivalry.

All non-American manifestations of hip-hop confront questions of whether non-black artists can create it and non-black people can participate and enjoy it. As Tricia Rose, in what remains a seminal text on hip-hop, states: “To suggest that rap is a black idiom that prioritizes black culture and that articulates problems of black urban life does not deny the pleasure and participation of others.”³⁷ Myanmar people identified with and appreciated the social conditions that gave rise to hip-hop as a culture in America. The binary of the oppressed against the oppressors that is central in American hip-hop was easily translated into the Myanmar context. Rappers, street artists, tattoo artists, skateboarders, and others in the underground hip-hop scene were oppressed and denigrated, and they used hip-hop as a culture to express themselves.

³⁷ Rose, *Black Noise*, 4.

In a way, Myanmar's repressive society created the conditions for underground rappers to create "authentic" hip-hop in response to their struggles. As Rose says,

"given the racially discriminatory context within which cultural syncretism takes place, some rappers have equated white participation with a process of dilution and subsequent theft of black culture. Although the terms dilution and theft do not capture the complexity of cultural incorporation and syncretism, this interpretation has more than a grain of truth in it."³⁸

Commercial pop musicians who appropriate hip-hop culture for its marketability in Myanmar and elsewhere in Asia are more accurately assigned the role of dilution and theft of the culture. In Yangon, this "dilution" and "theft" did not materialise from a different racial group, but from a different socio-economic group. That is, those who were the more commercial hip-hop artists in Myanmar and tended to come from wealthier legacy families, whereas underground hip-hop artists primarily came from lower class families and had struggled more for their art. Instead of being black and consigned to the fringes as outcasts, in Yangon being young and creative relegated these artists to the peripheries as outliers. The existing generation and the social conditions prior to 2010 had created the conditions for a hip-hop diaspora in Yangon that was authentically expressing itself through hip-hop, without appropriating its American origins through theft or dilution.

The success of mainstream commercial hip-hop in Myanmar, speaks to the country's readiness to embrace change and new cultures. The sugar-coated versions of hip-hop that were influenced by K-Pop, including popular artists Sai Sai Kham Hlaing (Sai Sai), Ye Lay, Bunny Phyoe, Bobby Soxer, and Hlwain Paing, had long been accepted by

³⁸ *ibid*, 5-6.

mainstream Myanmar society. After 2010 they increasingly started to turn to underground artists to give themselves a subversive edge, by “featuring” underground artists in their songs and music videos. One young underground artist, with tattoos all over his body, neck and face, made extra money by featuring in mainstream artists’ music videos. As a result, he was frequently recognised in the street by fans of these videos and commented that he was more famous for his cameos in their music videos than for his own music. In Myanmar, up and coming hip-hop artists were increasingly faced with a tension between commercialism and authenticity, which was a central tension of hip-hop around the world.

Yangon’s young hip-hop artists worked to situate themselves in the global hip-hop community and hip-hop history. Key to their positioning was their knowledge of the history and development of American hip-hop. This was also an important determinate in their perception as more or less authentic, and the respect they earned from other hip-hop artists. For example, the distinction between East Coast and West Coast styles of American rap was important, and one of the first things the author was asked about by several of the underground rappers. In Myanmar, hip-hop artists researched as many hip-hop songs, books, blogs, documentaries, and movies that they could find. Reflecting their research and appreciation of American hip-hop styles, Myanmar’s hip-hop artists divided themselves according to the two main styles of hip-hop: those who preferred the East Coast style; and those who were drawn to the more commercial West Coast style. Unpacking these terms and the connotations of the different styles, in different locations, is complicated.³⁹ In music terms, the East Coast/West Coast divide comes down to

³⁹ The rivalry between the two regions, and primarily between Bad Boy Records artists and Death Row Records artists, reached its height with the rivalry between the California-based gangsta rap scene headed by Tupac Shakur (West Coast: Death Row Records: LA) and the New York-based rap scene headed by Biggie Smalls (East Coast: Bad Boy Records). The rivalry, which played out mainly through actual or interpreted threats and slander in the rappers’ songs directed at one another, ended with Tupac shot dead on September 13, 1996, and Biggie shot dead on March 9, 1997. Neither murder has been solved.

rhyme, flow, tempo, instruments, and lyrics. East Coast tends to focus on free-flowing delivery, multi-syllabic rhymes, and personal attacks on other rappers. Freestyle rapping is an important element, with rap-battles originating on the East Coast in the late 1970's. In contrast, West Coast music tends to have more mainstream styling, with rolling bass-lines, synthesizers, and drum beats.⁴⁰ Those with significant knowledge bases of hip-hop culture and history included J-Me, G-Tone (and his group Cyclone OBO), and Yan Yan Chan (and his group ACID).

Another example of the deployment of established hip-hop culture, emanating from the West Coast/East Coast rivalry was G-Tone's group Cyclone's hand symbol for OBO. OBO (pronounced O-B-O), was used by the group as an alternate ending to their name, and was the address of their online blog. The OBO hand sign was a take on the "Blood" sign, in which the fingers are manipulated to spell out B-L-O-O-D. In the OBO iteration of the hand sign, the fingers were used to spell out O-B-O. The Bloods were an East Coast gang, which have ties to rappers and hip-hop in contemporary American hip-hop. It was another widely recognised symbol of hip-hop but was also a demonstration of a specialised knowledge which the majority of Myanmar's population did not recognise.

As a final example of the connections and the deployment of knowledge for status, J-Me's speech, posture and clothing style can be seen as a dubbing of East Coast culture.⁴¹ He spoke in an accent reminiscent of Notorious B.I.G., frequently wore the Wu-Tang Clan logo and his reputation largely extended from his prowess in freestyle rapping and battles. In American hip-hop, the threat of dilution and commercialisation has been

⁴⁰ The rise of "gansta rap" elsewhere in the world also manifested in Yangon, see Charis E. Kubrin, "Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas: Identity and the Code of the Street in Rap Music," *Social Problems* 52, no. 3 (2005).

⁴¹ Tom Boellstorff, "Dubbing Culture: Indonesian *gay* and *lesbi* Subjectivities and Ethnography in an Already Globalized World" *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 2 (2003).

countered by “the development of black forms and practices that are less and less accessible, forms that require greater knowledge of black language and styles in order to participate.”⁴² In Myanmar, this came from an emphasis on fast and technically complicated rapping in English, which displayed an extensive knowledge of old school rap through style, music samples and verbal references.

Authenticity versus copy songs

Elite young underground hip-hop artists worked to increase the appreciation of creativity and the importance of authenticity in Myanmar.⁴³ In the past, pop music had dominated popular music culture with *copy thachin*, or “copy songs” of international hits. In her pioneering book on Myanmar’s popular music industry, Heather MacLachlan explains that the country’s musicians “are heirs to a heritage which prefers to focus on imitation rather than innovation.”⁴⁴ In popular music, MacLachlan convincingly argues that the imitation and reproduction of music by artists does not degrade the value or the message of the songs between artist and audience. However, this appears to be a point of stark difference between the popular music MacLachlan researched and the underground hip-hop scene in Yangon. Underground hip-hop artists were challenging this legacy of inauthenticity and increasing the value of creativity in music.

In her book, MacLachlan explains *copy thachin* saying, “Burmese musicians do not create this music because they lack creativity, nor because they are trying to appropriate an

⁴² Rose, *Black Noise*, 5-6.

⁴³ The Myanmar education system has been criticised as promoting rote learning and can be viewed as a key institution in stifling the population’s creativity and individualism: Nick Cheesman, “School, State, and Sangha in Burma,” *Comparative Education* 39 (2003); Marie Lall, “Pushing the Child Centred Approach in Myanmar: The Role of Cross National Policy Networks and the Effects in the Classroom,” *Critical Studies in Education* 52 (2011).

⁴⁴ Heather MacLachlan, *Burma’s Pop Music Industry*.

American identity.”⁴⁵ Instead, she argues that the Myanmar people’s understanding of what constitutes a “good song” was a song that “is meaningful to contemporary audiences and demonstrates its meaningfulness by selling well.”⁴⁶ Relatedly, Myanmar artists were not “constrained by the Western scholarly belief that authenticity derives from originality” and so they could “create and perform songs that are authentically their own while also being explicit copies of English hits.”⁴⁷ The musicians’ desires to connect with audiences and show something of themselves was also a key value of underground hip-hop musicians, however, the vehicle for that connection was no longer *copy thachin*.

Jane Ferguson, a scholar of Myanmar popular music who has previously defended *copy thachin*, argued in a 2016 article that popular music trends were moving away from the copy songs.⁴⁸ In a 2013 article, Ferguson argues that “covering is a form of local re-signification of the melodies, meanings and aesthetics of international popular songs.”⁴⁹ In the 2016 article, she still defends *copy thachin* as a legitimate expression, but argues that with the exposure of Myanmar to international standards of copy songs, some in Myanmar were beginning to view “the ostensibly derivative genre as a source of embarrassment.”⁵⁰ Ferguson argues that the growing dislike for *copy thachin* was a “manifestation of one’s own elite positioning within Myanmar society, relative to the tastes of others, but also an expression of anxiety regarding how national culture might be perceived in the cosmopolitan arena.”⁵¹ After 2010, it seemed that underground rappers were no longer anxious about how their culture would be perceived in the

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 180.

⁴⁶ *ibid*.

⁴⁷ *ibid*.

⁴⁸ Ferguson, “Burmese Super Trouper;” Jane Ferguson, “Yesterday Once More: Tracking (un)Popular Music in Contemporary Myanmar,” *The Journal of Burma Studies* 20, no. 2 (2016), 229-257.

⁴⁹ Ferguson, “Burmese Super Trouper,” 237.

⁵⁰ Ferguson, “Yesterday Once More,” 230.

⁵¹ *ibid*, 231.

international arena, and had the confidence to position themselves as elite using cultural capital derived from creating authentic hip-hop music.

Copy thachin had been almost unavoidable in Myanmar for aspiring artists – with many artists’ first albums commonly being full of *copy thachin* songs, in order to ensure recording deals and popularity.⁵² Ferguson lists some (in)famous *copy thachin* songs by some of Myanmar’s biggest pop music artists, including pop star Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein’s rendition of Celine Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On” into *A Chit Myar Lat Saung* (“A Gift of Love”), and D Yoon Lay’s repurposing of Beyoncé’s “Halo” as *A Sone Mae A Chit* (“Endless Love”).⁵³ On Ferguson’s list is a more surprising artist: Anezza, one of Myanmar’s most famous underground hip-hop artists with his remake of Eminem’s “The Real Slim Shady” as *Kyi Nay Ya* (“Looking Out”). When underground artists were asked about *copy thachin*, particularly involving underground artists such as Anezza, they said that they accepted that it was the “way things used to be done” and that it had been a necessary evil to promote hip-hop in the Myanmar market. They were not overly concerned or judgemental about artists who had made *copy thachin* songs in the past, for example saying of Anezza: “I would not do it, but times were tough and some people choose to do some of those songs to get famous. He does not do them anymore.”⁵⁴

Since 2010, the perception of *copy thachin* underwent a significant change and many artists began to completely reject and lament it as inauthentic. One of the most popular underground hip-hop groups, ACID, released their first album in 2000. The album, which was widely considered the first ever hip-hop album in Myanmar, included a cover

⁵² *ibid.*, 230.

⁵³ Ferguson, “Yesterday Once More.”

⁵⁴ Fieldwork notes, November 2014.

of Cypress Hill's song, *Insane in the Brain*. Cypress Hill are a West Coast hip-hop group, and *Insane in the Brain* was released in 1993 and dominated the US charts that year.⁵⁵ Other underground artists considered this cover song was an unfortunate necessity, saying it had worked to establish hip-hop in Myanmar's popular music scene. In 2014 G-Tone explained that ACID "made a copy album to get followers, and then they never copied again."⁵⁶ Myanmar's music industry in the early 2000's was resistant to new music styles, dominated as it was by *copy thachin* pop and rock songs. For ACID to gain any traction with the first hip-hop album in this atmosphere, underground hip-hop artists understood the need for them to draw on the popularity of a proven hip-hop song to help the genre gain popularity. After 2010 though, underground hip-hop artists almost unanimously lamented *copy thachin* and its impact on Myanmar music and culture, but the main target of their vitriol were artists who continued to produce such songs, despite what they saw as an industry that had moved on from inauthentic copy songs.

Underground hip-hop artists were among the least sympathetic and most outspoken about artists who continued to release *copy thachin*. Ye Naung of PBD Hood gave one of his blunt and somewhat superficial answers when asked about *copy thachin*, simply saying it "sucks." When pushed he said he did not think there was any place for it in the future of hip-hop in Yangon, because it simply was not music as "you need to create music, cause it's art."⁵⁷ Ye Naung's answers were interesting because he was one of the more socially mobile and commercially driven of the underground hip-hop scene. He rarely drank alcohol, abstained from all drugs, and did not smoke cigarettes. He was an up and comer in the underground freestyle scene, having made a name for himself by winning several rap battles in dayclubs across Yangon. He formed the group "PBD Hood" with

⁵⁵ "The Year in Music: 1993," *Billboard: The International Newsweekly of Music, Video and Home Entertainment*, December 25, 1993.

⁵⁶ Fieldwork notes, August 2014.

⁵⁷ Fieldwork notes, September 2013.

two other young men, Big Sam and Ag Ko. Ye Naung was always an underground artist, but the level of struggle and genuine affinity with hip-hop always seemed to be less for him than for the more mature underground hip-hop artists. He constantly modelled confronting hip-hop trends in the Yangon scene, such as getting dreadlocks, dying his hair red, wearing particular fashions, and was very outspoken in his views on the “struggle” and the Yangon scene. Despite his best attempts though, Ye Naung’s appearance and message always came across as slightly less convincing than the more established and less vocal artists.

Many of the other underground artists who had been producing their music prior to 2010, such as G-Tone, had been persecuted and arrested in the past. These artists continued to pursue hip-hop not for the fame but because it seemed inconceivable to them that they would not spend their lives creating and performing hip-hop music. One of these artists connected *copy thachin* with the population’s repression, saying that children are “naturally always dancing and singing and creating” but that they lost the opportunity to dance and sing and become “robots” by going through an education system that promoted rote learning and growing up in familial structures that encouraged conformity.⁵⁸ While both the new and the old underground artists criticised *copy thachin*, the sentiment motivating their distaste was different. Ye Naung was reiterating the international hip-hop culture revulsion for inauthenticity, as Ferguson describes, whereas G-Tone and others condemned the practice because it represented what they had spent their lives working against and undermined their goal of a Myanmar that valued creativity. In June 2014, a commercial hip-hop artist, Hlwan Paing, released a new album that included one *copy thachin*. When asked about the song, J-Me, one of the most established underground artists, expressed disappointment rather than anger or

⁵⁸ Fieldwork notes, August 2013.

condemnation that the song was included on the album, saying “I thought we were past that.”⁵⁹

For studies of *copy thachin*, including the authenticity of the pop musicians who performed them in the past, deference is given to Heather MacLachlan and Jane Ferguson’s excellent studies. After 2010, however, this thesis argues that among underground hip-hop artists in Yangon the production of new *copy thachin* commanded little respect and that they were dismissed as inauthentic. Ferguson acknowledges the growing unpopularity of *copy thachin* and points to instances of YouTube activism with obscene comments and blog posts criticising *copy thachin*,⁶⁰ Ferguson presents some Myanmar people’s reactions to *copy thachin* on YouTube and *copy thachin* artists’ own explanations, which are two important voices in the *copy thachin* debate. Another important voice is that of the artists who chose not to produce *copy thachin* music. Perhaps most important is to acknowledge that underground artists did not contest the artistic merits of the poetry or the lyrics of *copy thachin* or the authenticity with which the artists were “revealing their hearts.”⁶¹ However, underground artists, as a voice of the new generation in Yangon, were clearly and consistently saying that *copy thachin* no longer had a place in popular music in Myanmar.

Prejudice and intolerance

The new generation of underground hip-hop artists negotiated an alternative to prejudice and intolerance to difference. The object of their struggle was the indefinable sentiment of mistrust and vigilance that lingered over Myanmar relationships.⁶² In a country where

⁵⁹ Fieldwork notes, September 2014

⁶⁰ Ferguson, “Yesterday Once More.”

⁶¹ MacLachlan, *Burma’s Pop Music Industry*, 180; Ferguson, “Burmese Super Trouper.”

⁶² Ian Holliday, “National Unity Struggles in Myanmar: A Degenerate Case of Governance for Harmony in Asia,” *Asian Survey* 47, no. 3 (2007).

the resolution of Myanmar's ethnic problems has been called "the most important, continuing, and contentious issue" unseating the Bamar-, Buddhist- and Yangon-centric chauvinism is vital to stability.⁶³ From 2010 to 2016, the underground hip-hop community worked to supplant the perception of difference as threatening and undesirable with a more accepting and inclusive attitude.⁶⁴ Hip-hop artists in Yangon strove to combat religious and ethnic intolerance by changing Myanmar society to recognise them as Myanmar people – whether they were Muslim, Karen, Christian, tattooed, or dreadlocked. These young men were united by their collective creativity, but they were also aligned by their personal struggles with intolerance. Some of these young men were set apart and relegated to judgement by indelible physical signals of difference. Typically, these included the traits and characteristics of their ethnic group. For the new generation, however, these came to include other physical markers of difference, such as tattoos and piercings.

In the hip-hop community, tattoos were perceived as a permanent commitment and an outlet for self-expression.⁶⁵ Some chose large and visible tattoos in order to mark themselves as different and identify that they were embracing foreign social practices as members of the new generation. The size and placement of some tattoos, on necks, faces, and hands, meant that these young men could not, even in their weakest moments, conform to conservative Myanmar culture. These tattooed artists, and the other misfits of the hip-hop community, were aligned with other marginalised groups and were persecuted for something they could not change. Of course, an important distinction was that they had chosen to be tattooed and were not born that way. However, some of these

⁶³ David I Steinberg, "The Problem of Democracy in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar: Neither Nation-State Nor State-Nation," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2012).

⁶⁴ Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*.

⁶⁵ Kathleen Doss and Amy S. Ebesu Hubbard, "The Communicative Value of Tattoos: The Role of Public Self-Consciousness on Tattoo Visibility," *Communication Research Reports* 26, no. 1 (2009).

young men said they saw their tattoos as an expression of who they were and without them, they would have been inauthentic to themselves. The underground hip-hop community included members of the dominant Bamar-Buddhist identity, however, these young men chose to display their alliance with the misfits and outcasts of Myanmar society by tattooing themselves, getting extreme haircuts such as dreadlocks, and dressing in a confronting manner.

Katherine Irwin argues that heavily tattooed individuals are simultaneously “positive and negative deviants” with some observers considering them artful and others finding them vile.⁶⁶ Tattoos challenge assumptions of deviance by highlighting how deviance is temporally and spatially contextual.⁶⁷ Research by Josh Adams has shown that in the West, particularly Western Europe and America, in the 2000s tattooing moved from its position in the “domain of those deemed socially undesirable” to become increasingly de-stigmatised and viewed as “fashionable and exotic.”⁶⁸ Studies have shown that as the practice becomes more popular the motivation behind getting tattooed and the kinds of people who get tattooed have changed and a more diversified clientele are now choosing to get tattoos.⁶⁹ Despite this, tattoos in “extra-stigmatising” areas such as the face, neck, hands, and fingers continue to retain some marginal characteristics.⁷⁰ In Myanmar, this transition from tattoos being considered “negatively deviant” to “positively deviant” was visible as it enjoyed increased popularity among elite young people.

An important element in the revaluation of tattoos was their adoption by those people that David Simon calls “elite deviants” or members of the American power elite who

⁶⁶ Katherine Irwin, “Saints and Sinners: Elite Tattoo Collectors and Tattooists as Positive and Negative Deviants,” *Sociological Spectrum* 23, no.1 (2003), 29.

⁶⁷ Josh Adams, “Marked Difference: Tattooing and its Association with Deviance in the United States,” *Deviant Behaviour* 30, no. 3 (2009), 267.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 285.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

break legal, moral, and ethical codes.⁷¹ From 2010 to 2016 the elite young deviants of Yangon – led by the underground rappers in the new generation – were breaking legal, moral, and ethical codes by using confronting tattoos to unseat the existing generation’s legal, moral, and ethical codes. Rather than being confined to traditional and religious tattoos, the popularity of hip-hop culture brought the attendant culture of tattooing as an art form to Yangon. Heavily tattooed young people – including full sleeves, neck, and face tattoos – and the growing number of tattoo parlours and tattoo artists attested to tattoos becoming an important symbol of youth, *mite deh*, and hip-hop. The way these young men were perceived by the majority of the population however, continued to be with suspicion, reading their tattoos as symbols of deviance, rebellion, and criminality.

The destigmatisation of tattoos was in its infancy in Yangon, with widespread judgement and persecution still rife. As one heavily tattooed young man in Yangon said in a Facebook status: “Foreign bosses see tattoos and think: interesting. Myanmar bosses see tattoos and think: shit criminal, run.”⁷² Sometimes, young Myanmar people with tattoos in “extra-stigmatising” areas were perceived as so foreign looking that other Myanmar people would assume that they were foreigners.⁷³ This generally only occurred when the young men were in small numbers, and often when they were with foreigners speaking English. While the young men sometimes said they were offended when they were mistaken for foreigners, they also said they sometimes enjoyed the freedom they felt as a result. In taxis, cafes, and bars, Myanmar people would speak to them in English and often the tattooed young men would not correct them. On one occasion, Albert explained that he liked it when this happened because then the Myanmar people would

⁷¹ David R. Simon, *Elite Deviance* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002); Mills, *The Power Elite*.

⁷² Young Myanmar man’s private Facebook status, March 2014.

⁷³ Adams, “Marked Difference,” 285.

not stare at him, make negative comments about his tattoos, or treat him “like a criminal about to rob them.”⁷⁴

The new generation and elite young people were unevenly and sporadically exposed to various segments of Myanmar society. The perception of these heavily tattooed young men reflected the level of the viewer’s exposure to foreign ideas and images. Other elite people or young people were generally less judgemental of tattooed young men, and some would complement their tattoos as art or *mite deh*. For others who had less or no exposure to foreign styles, they could not even fathom that a Myanmar person could be heavily tattooed and would assume they must be foreigners. The destigmatisation of tattoos was occurring through the top-down gentrification of Myanmar culture.⁷⁵

Members of the new generation with heavy and visible tattoos were actively changing what it meant to be a Myanmar person and what identities young Myanmar people could emulate.⁷⁶

Conclusion

The underground hip-hop artists negotiated between the elite new generation and the wider population. They provided an accessible interpretation of the foreign for the local context. Myanmar’s new generation of elite hip-hop artists were supporting the notion that cultural globalisation includes the development of global cultures through local “remediation” of existing cultures with the foreign and global.⁷⁷ In Yangon, underground hip-hop artists were negotiating between local and foreign cultures, including through the

⁷⁴ Fieldwork notes, July 2014.

⁷⁵ Halnon and Cohen, “Muscles, Motorcycles and Tattoos.”

⁷⁶ Recently the city has a growing number of tattoo parlours with tattoo artists gaining reputations and charging rates on par with international artists for their designs. Occasionally their designs will have a distinctly Burmese style, however, many have little resemblance to traditional Burmese tattoos.

⁷⁷ David Novac, “Cosmopolitanism, Remediation, and the Ghost World of Bollywood,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 1 (2010).

reevaluation of elite qualities to include previously subversive qualities, such as tattoos. They were also working to raise the value of and appreciation for originality and creativity, through their opposition and devaluation of *copy thachin* as the dominant genre of popular music. Finally, they were working as “elite deviants” to break existing legal, moral, and ethical codes and to create new ones that were more accepting of the qualities and characteristics they valued.⁷⁸

Underground hip-hop artists were members of the new generation and their remediation of the foreign into the local was one way that they influenced change regarding what it meant to be a young Myanmar person. David Novac argues that culture and identities for the contemporary subject are “made through remediation, rather than... loss or subversion,” and that “appropriation is a creative act, which feeds circulating media into new expressions and performances.”⁷⁹ Cultural remediation and localisation through the process of cultural globalisation can be seen to influence the development of all parts of identity and cultures.⁸⁰ Other studies have shown how areas of individual expression and leisure can be politicised and used for a state’s nation-building agenda – as witnessed through the use of popular music and underground rappers to campaign during the 2015 Myanmar election and to promote Myanmar during national festivals.⁸¹

After 2010, the underground rappers leveraged their fame and notoriety to gain cultural capital. That cultural capital afforded them elite status, and they were outliers of the new generation. Unlike the first three social groups, the gangsters, the cronies, and the young women, the underground rappers were using their profile and elite status to encourage

⁷⁸ Simon, *Elite Deviance*; Mills, *The Power Elite*.

⁷⁹ Novac, “Cosmopolitanism, Remediation, and the Ghost World of Bollywood,” 41-2.

⁸⁰ Karen Strassler, “The Face of Money: Currency, Crisis, and Remediation in Post-Suharto Indonesia,” *Cultural Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (2009).

⁸¹ Sarah Moser, “Creating Citizens Through Play: The Role of Leisure in Indonesian Nation-Building,” *Social and Cultural Geography* 11, no. 1 (2010).

significant change in Myanmar, including the remediation and appropriation of foreign cultures into local elite practice. In such a way, the underground rappers represented new elite practices and composition after 2010.

This thesis identifies these underground rappers as members of the new generation. The artists played an influential role interpreting social and economic change in Myanmar. This thesis was able to identify these young men as influential by taking an elite-based approach, rather than a class-based approach which would not have considered them alongside the other social groups. By considering the new generation in Myanmar according to an elite-approach, it was possible to identify underground hip-hop artists as commanding enough cultural capital to gain elite status. Underground hip-hop artists were not elite as a result of financial or legacy capital. Reliant as they were on cultural capital, the artists were dependent on public opinion and support from an audience for their status. They were on the outer edge of the elite new generation, unable to shield themselves from public scrutiny behind familial networks or rely on inherited financial capital. They changed elite composition to include cultural capital alongside the previously dominant legacy and financial capital of the gangsters and the cronies.

The underground rappers were the front line of the new generation, translating the social and economic changes that were occurring for their audience, communities, and country. Many used their profiles to shape their country's values and culture to be more tolerant of difference. This Chapter has analysed some of their practices to demonstrate how they impacted on Myanmar during this period. They increased the value of creativity and worked to develop Myanmar's popular culture away from the effects of decades of censorship. They changed popular music by refusing to produce *copy thachin*, and instead, they made their version of authentic hip-hop music a part of the country's popular culture. They worked to overcome stigmas associated with physical markers considered

deviant, such as tattoos, which were met with discrimination and judgement. In these ways, the underground rappers played a role in shaping Myanmar society's legal, moral, and ethical codes for a new generation.

Chapter 6

The Creatives

Arjun Appadurai argues that the “work of the imagination” is a constitutive element in the development of subjectivity in the modern world.¹ Appadurai argues for a theory of historical rupture, in which the media and migration have irrevocably changed the global order. In this new global order, individuals are faced with new global cultural flows – of migration, media, technology, finance, and ideas – and use their imaginations to interpret those flows. As individuals around the world interpret these flows into their lives and surrounds, so too did the creative imaginants² of Yangon who created multiple “imagined worlds.”³ The young creatives analysed in this Chapter mediated global cultural flows into Yangon, in an effort to create hybridised imagined worlds in Myanmar.⁴ The creatives crafted cultural worlds including a new art scene, a fashion revolution, an openly gay elite scene, and a new popular music style. Unlike the gangsters, the cronies, and the *chit thus*, the creatives were intentionally trying to create a

¹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 31.

² “Imaginant” was used by Sir Francis Bacon as a noun to describe one who imagines. Imaginant was first used by Bacon in 1601 in his attempt to explain eye sight: “the power and act of imagination, intensive upon other bodies than the body of the imaginant,” Francis Bacon, *The Essays*, (London: Penguin Books, 1985): 83; elsewhere Bacon describes “[f]ascination is the power and act of imagination, intensive upon other bodies, than the body of the imaginant,” Sir Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, edited by Joseph Devey (New York: P.F. Collier and Sons, 1901). For more on Francis Bacon’s “multivalent, sometimes elusive, but surely pervasive” idea of the imagination in science and its relationship to rationality, see Sorana Corneanu and Koen Vermeir, “Idols of the Imagination: Francis Bacon on the Imagination and the Medicine of the Mind,” *Perspectives on Science* 20, no. 2 (2012): 183. Bacon is famously quoted as saying, “[i]magination was given to man to compensate him for what he is not.” Imaginant can be used as both adjective and noun, it is used here as a noun.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, 33.

new generation that did away with much of the existing systems of meaning and established elite practices. The creatives seemed to be driven to overhaul systems by a sense that the current system had no place for them, their styles, or their lifestyles. They were motivated and enthusiastically pursued their visions and plans for their country.

Prior to 2010, Myanmar society had been largely unaccommodating of the creatives. The Myanmar military junta had oppressed cultural difference by manipulating various institutions, including communities and families, to create an atmosphere of fear and scrutiny.⁵ Despite coming from wealthy families, the creatives were not able to express themselves freely under military rule. Instead, many of the wealthy creatives moved overseas for school and university. After their educations, these young men remained overseas and established themselves as international fashion designers, and online “influencers.”⁶ After 2012, however, Myanmar welcomed foreign investment and the country grew richer with more disposable income, and infrastructure improved. Responding to these developments, some of the creatives began to repatriate to Yangon. By 2014, many of these young men had laid down roots in Yangon and began to create their new imagined worlds in Myanmar – a utopian creation of wealth, tolerance, and creativity. By 2016, some had realised their imagined worlds in art and popular music, while those in the fashion world had faced infrastructure issues that were beyond their ability to address. As the other members of the new generation, the creatives were engaged in a complicated process of social and economic change, which ultimately resulted in uneven changes to elite composition and practice by 2016.

⁵ Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*, 140.

⁶ Influencer is a term for a social media personality who may be sponsored by particular companies, and are paid to promote events and brands through their social media accounts. In some ways, an influencer is a socialite who has monetised their popularity.

The creatives were actors of cultural change who worked to create a hybridised world in Myanmar that was in touch with global systems. In some ways, Appadurai makes an argument for the need for new theories to understand these kinds of local interactions with globalisation. Appadurai argues that the globalised world includes new global flows of information, goods, and people on scales hitherto unimaginable. In the face of immeasurable new flows, existing theories fall down.⁷ Appadurai's arguments are instructive, highlighting the role of local individuals and the way a person's imagination of the foreign is mediated into the local landscape. Appadurai argues that new global processes render the "imagination as a social practice," and that the social practice of imagination is "no longer elite pastime [and] thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people."⁸

The process of creatively linking the country into global cultural flows began in earnest after 2013, led by Ivan Pun in the contemporary art and restaurant world. Steven Oo, an internationally established fashion designer, repatriated to Myanmar in 2013, and worked to create a new Myanmar fashion. Local tailors also began to design foreign influenced Myanmar clothes for the population, in ways that ultimately proved more effective than Steven Oo's high fashion ways. Also in the fashion scene, openly gay men became more visible at fashion shows and press conferences.⁹ In the popular music scene, Ar-T, a young popular artist raised the profile of the burgeoning LGBTQ community by

⁷ Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman's theories of late/liquid modernity foreshadow this reflexive process of constant fluidity in the face of a stream of incoming information. See Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*; Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 31.

⁹ The terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people are used throughout consistent with the "GLAAD Media Reference Guide," 10th Edition, October 2016, <http://www.glaad.org/reference#guide>.

expanding the boundaries of sexuality in music videos and openly gay men in popular music.¹⁰

Creating new urban spaces

Ivan Pun repatriated to Myanmar in 2011 and began to create a new hospitality and art world there. In 2014, Pun opened a restaurant and a conceptual art gallery that represented a visible break with traditional restaurants and art galleries. Pun created spaces that appropriated existing Myanmar into new imagined spaces, but did not seek to erase the existing features of the spaces, including their architecture and uses. By doing so, Pun was designing spaces that catered to a growing group of elite people in Myanmar.

Ivan Pun is the son of Serge Pun, chairman of Singapore-listed Yoma Strategic Holdings, which owns a considerable amount of real estate in Myanmar and overseas, and Myanmar company Serge Pun and Associates (SPA Group) which owns a Myanmar bank, construction companies and other ventures. Serge Pun was considered one of the “cleanest” and least corrupt Myanmar cronies. Born in Myanmar, Serge fled Myanmar in 1965 to avoid reprisals against foreign residents following the first coup by Ne Win. He migrated with his family to Beijing and later Hong Kong. Serge Pun returned to Myanmar in 1991, saying “I’d kept thinking about it and wanted to go back ... when I visited in 1989, I was astounded by the acute need for investment; I felt a strange but strong desire, like a moral obligation, to do something for this country I had known as prosperous and beautiful... it had become so run down, so destitute.”¹¹ Ivan Pun grew up

¹⁰ A local Yangon organisation “&PROUD” organised an annual LGBTI Film Festival, art exhibitions, and photo workshops. &PROUD’s Facebook page, www.facebook.com/andPROUD/. Another Yangon organisation “YG Events” organised a monthly “club night for lesbians, gays, and friends” called ‘Fab’, YG Events’ Facebook page, www.facebook.com/EventsYG/.

¹¹ Gwen Robinson, “A Business School of Hard Knocks,” *The Financial Times*, September 10, 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/f9093c8a-f8cd-11e1-b4ba-00144feabdc0>.

in Beijing and Hong Kong with his family. Ivan Pun returned to Yangon in 2011, and became “a poster child for the emerging cosmopolitan Myanmar, at least among the fashionable, jet setting circles in which he travels.”¹²

In late 2014, Ivan Pun opened Port Autonomy, a Brooklyn-style pop-up restaurant and bar, and TS-1, an upmarket art gallery, in an industrial zone at Latha Jetty on the Yangon River. Ivan Pun was imagining and creating spaces for the new generation. The opening of the gallery was a spectacle of chauffeured luxury cars driving along potholed dirt roads, past impoverished roadside stall holders and rickshaw drivers going about their business as Yangon’s elite young people stepped over mud puddles in their high heels to enter the TS-1 mecca of contemporary art and later into the “faux urban grit” of Port Autonomy next door, for expensive Myanmar fusion food and drink.¹³ The two venues sat in stark contrast to their surrounds as examples of what some called “hyper-gentrification.”¹⁴ The appropriation of unconventional spaces in working-class surrounds carried a particular hipster cache.

Pun’s developments created a hybridised version of the foreign and the new with the local and the old. As the TS-1 website itself claimed, the ventures were intended “to spearhead urban renewal and cultural exchange in a city on the verge of unprecedented change.”¹⁵ TS-1, located on the docks of the Yangon river, kept the external features of the building including the army green industrial corrugated iron shed doors. It took its name from the existing building, “transit shed 1.” The interior was washed out in

¹² Vanessa Lawrence, “Meet Ivan Pun, the Young Entrepreneur Revitalizing Myanmar,” *W Magazine*, October 6, 2016, <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/meet-ivan-pun-the-young-entrepreneur-revitalizing-myanmar>.

¹³ “Port Autonomy’s Second Mooring: Hipster Eatery Reopens in Leafy Yangon,” *Coconuts Yangon*, April 6, 2015, <http://yangon.coconuts.co/2015/04/06/port-autonomys-second-mooring-hipster-eatery-re-opens-leafy-yangon>.

¹⁴ Natalie B. Compton, “Can a Third-World Nation Handle a ‘Hipster Restaurant Empire,’” *Vice: Munchies*, March 16, 2015, <http://munchies.vice.com/articles/can-a-third-world-nation-handle-a-hipster-restaurant-empire>.

¹⁵ Compton, “Can a Third-World Nation Handle a ‘Hipster Restaurant Empire’”

modern white but retained the exposed wooden truss beams and the rusted iron roof, updating the floor with a poured concrete slab. TS-1 displayed contemporary art that was cutting edge and often confronting, but always by local Myanmar artists. Whether it was a challenging performance artwork, a mixed media piece that juxtaposed old and new Myanmar, or huge street art style pieces, TS-1's art shows revealed the complex negotiation and sometimes conflict that was going on between the new and the old Myanmar by Myanmar people. In another space of TS-1, divided from the art gallery by a partial white wall, was a retail space that included high-end international fashions alongside a collection of textiles, homewares, and furniture by local artists under a brand established by Pun, "Myanmar Made." Pun was also working on a furniture label, "Paribawga,"¹⁶ to crafted contemporary designs from local timber. Pun imagined a version of Yangon that was in some ways a reflection of himself and others in the new generation: avowedly proud Myanmar people who were also young, in touch with global systems, and part of a new generation.

Despite the attempt to create their own space in Myanmar, TS-1 and Port Autonomy were forced to leave the docks in 2014. The rumour among his patrons was that Ivan Pun had set up the venues without the required liquor licenses and approvals, assuming that his father's money and influence would ensure they were granted later. It seemed that the strengthening of regulatory frameworks and rising intolerance for corruption in Yangon's property market made it difficult to receive a liquor license and the required permits. While in this instance the attempted dispossession¹⁷ and repurposing of the location were unsuccessful, it did little to assuage fears that the developments would marginalise current residents.

¹⁶ *Paribawga* translates as "furniture".

¹⁷ Prominently in Delhi, Seoul, Mumbai in David Harvey, "The Right to the City" *New Left Review* 53 (Sept/Oct 2008), 34

The attempted appropriation of Myanmar culture by TS-1 and Port Autonomy and their elite clientele made them highly political ventures and they received harsh criticism for their first location. Perhaps more surprisingly, Port Autonomy also did not fit into its second location alongside other wealthy people.¹⁸ When Port Autonomy moved to Golden Valley (see Map 2), it found itself alongside embassy houses and on the grounds of the upmarket Golden Hill Towers condominium, where as one reviewer observed, it felt “out of context, like a ship full of hipsters marooned in the middle of Midsommer’s Night Dream.”¹⁹ Port Autonomy went on to flourish in its new location, though it lacked the grungy and subversive edge that its original dock surrounds had conferred. Port Autonomy created and catered to a style of consumption that was popular in America, in cities like San Francisco, that was not elegant or luxurious but more bohemian and similar to the style dubbed “hipster.”²⁰

To understand the effect of TS-1 and Port Autonomy on the urban landscape of Yangon,²¹ it is necessary to search for a new theory of urban space as existing theories, such as cosmopolitanism, embougeoisement, gentrification, and urbanisation, do not adequately account for this style of urban development.²² Explaining the failing of urbanisation theories to patterns of development in Southeast Asia, H.W. Dick and P.J. Rimmer argue that studies of Southeast Asian cities suffer from a fundamental

¹⁸ Phil Hubbard, “Hipsters on Our High Streets: Consuming the Gentrification Frontier,” *Sociological Research Online* 2, no. 3.

¹⁹ “Port Autonomy’s Second Mooring: Hipster Eatery Reopens in Leafy Yangon,” *Coconuts Yangon*.

²⁰ “Port Autonomy’s Second Mooring: Hipster Eatery Reopens in Leafy Yangon,” *Coconuts Yangon*; Ico Maly and Piia Varis, “The 21st-Century Hipster: On Micro-Populations in Times of Superdiversity,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (August 18, 2015).

²¹ For a background in the urban development of Yangon under colonial rule see: Yda Saueressig-Schreuder, “The Impact of British Colonial Rule on the Urban Hierarchy of Burma,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 10, no. 2 (1986); Naing Oo, “Urbanization and Economic Development in Burma,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 4, no. 2 (1989).

²² For some relevant material on those theories see Harvey, “The Right to the City,” 33; Matthew W. Rofe, “‘I Want to be Global’: Theorising the Gentrifying Class as an Emergent Elite Global Community,” *Urban Studies* 40 (2003), 2518; Halnon and Cohen, “Muscles, Motorcycles and Tattoos.”

misconception of the region's urban geography.²³ They posit that rather than considering Third World cities as on a well-trodden path of urban development, Southeast Asian cities are actually converging with "Western patterns of urbanization" due to processes of globalisation.²⁴ Scholars who consider Southeast Asian cities as Third World cities overlook the trajectory and development of these cities.²⁵ Rather than search for and focus on the unique elements of Southeast Asian cities, Dick and Rimmer say that "globalisation has made the paradigm of the Third World City obsolete in [Southeast Asia]."²⁶ T.G. McGee et al disagree with this critique and argue that while Dick and Rimmer's convergence theory may have relevance in cities such as Singapore and Bangkok, others such as Phnom Penn and Manila (and conceivably Yangon) retain many Third World city characteristics.²⁷ In 2016, it remained unclear if Yangon was converging with Western patterns of urbanisation or conforming to the Third World city paradigm. Whatever the future outcome of urban development in Yangon, from 2010 to 2016 what was visible was an appropriation of urban space for the new generation's purposes. These purposes often resulted in instances of Western-style urbanisation, which indicated that Western patterns of urbanisation may develop, though they were not yet widespread.²⁸

²³ H.W. Dick and P.J. Rimmer, "Beyond the Third World City: The New Urban Geography of South-East Asia" *Urban Studies* 35, no. 12 (1998).

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ For examples of these scholars see, Tery McGee, "The Emergence of *desokota* regions in Asia: Expanding a Hypothesis," in *The Extended Metropolis: Settlement Transition in Asia*, eds. Bruce Koppel, Norton Ginsberg, and T.G. McGee (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).

²⁶ Dick and Rimmer, "Beyond the Third World City," 2304.

²⁷ T.G. McGee et al., *China's Urban Space: Development Under Market Socialism* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2007), 12.

²⁸ Whether this cosmopolitanism is something new, or a rejuvenation of an atmosphere of cosmopolitanism that also occurred during the mid-nineteenth century in Rangoon as a port city. See Su Lin Lewis, "Print and Colonial Port Cultures of the Indian Ocean Littoral: Penang and Rangoon," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 82, no. 2 (2009).

The historical uses and design of Yangon is relevant when considering the city's development. During colonial rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British colonisers used Yangon (then Rangoon) as a port city. The city was modelled as a European city: its streets were laid out on a grid and its wide boulevards were filled with grand colonial buildings. Bert Hoselitz argues that Rangoon "existed as one of the emporia of the world market rather than as a capital of a native, culturally distinct, population."²⁹ The city was a global city rather than a Burmese city and was manipulated for the purposes of the time. The legacy of this colonial influence remained visible in Yangon after 2010, and the conservation of colonial buildings became something of a trend among the elite young people, as described in the Introduction.³⁰

TS-1, and Port Autonomy were pioneering examples of how Yangon was once more being developed as a global city and its colonial buildings were again accommodating the foreign needs of its elite inhabitants. The style of development and the speed of the TS-1 and Port Autonomy ventures was defended by Ivan Pun's partner in Port Autonomy, chef Kevin Ching, who said, "What I'm doing with Ivan right now has to be done *right now*. In one year, Ivan and I will no longer be the frontrunners in this hipster restaurant empire or whatever you want to call it. In one year from now, two years, these opportunities won't be here."³¹ At the base of discussions of how social change should or could progress was the inescapable inevitability that it was happening. The creative imaginants were explicitly driven to renew urban Yangon as somewhere they belonged, as their homeland, and they were not taking it slow.

²⁹ Bert F. Hoselitz, "Generative and Parasitic Cities," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 3, no. 3 (1955), 289.

³⁰ Yangon also underwent significant changes under the military junta, including significant expansion in the late 1980s when the government more than doubled its size by establishing three new towns, see Than Nwe, "Yangon: The Emergence of a New Spatial Order in Myanmar's Capital City," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 13, no. 1 (1998).

³¹ Compton, "Can a Third-World Nation Handle a 'Hipster Restaurant Empire.'"

Pun and his developments received criticism that reflected much of the condemnation faced by the new generation more broadly.³² The criticism seemed fuelled by a sense that the creatives and their patrons were choosing to callously display their wealth and privilege, made more explicit with their choice of a working class location.³³ One local newspaper article sensationally summarised the criticism faced by Pun's projects, describing Port Autonomy as where "rich twenty-somethings laugh in the faces of the poor while knocking back champagne cocktails and feasting on the corpses of their children."³⁴ Pun engaged with this criticism, responding to it and even designing his businesses seemingly anticipating it. Pun has said, "I felt it was unfair to frame it like that... Of course, there was always going to be a contrast, but if you don't push the boundaries, Yangon will never progress. We coexisted perfectly well with our neighbours. That article didn't mention, for example, that we held regular photography workshops for local children. There was never a feeling that we were alienating the local residents; we really tried to engage the community."³⁵

Foreign observers mawkishly watched the development of Myanmar, and various projects that led to a particular kind of social change were lambasted in the international media and by expatriates. The economic and social inequalities of Pun's version of Yangon were manifest. A foreigner once said, "they should be lynched, all of them. Spending daddy's money on their self-serving bullshit while their country starves."³⁶ Such vitriol was common and seemed to be, in part, motivated by a sentiment reminiscent of

³² There is also criticism of the hipster trend by young people, see Janna Michael, "It's Really Not Hip to be a Hipster: Negotiating Trends and Authenticity in the Cultural Field," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 15.

³³ Mahtani, "Meet the New Rich... in Myanmar."

³⁴ Charlotte Rose, "Restaurant Review: Port Autonomy's New Venture Puts the 'Fine' in Fine Italian Dining," *Myanmar Times*, May 8, 2015, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/lifestyle/dining/14363-la-carovana.html>.

³⁵ Madeleine Ross, "On the Road with Ivan Pun," *Hong Kong Tatler* (25 April 2016), <http://hk.asiatatler.com/society/ivan-pun-interview-yangon-myanmar>.

³⁶ Fieldwork notes, September 2015.

Orientalism and a “misplaced mix of nostalgia and voyeurism” for the “old days.”³⁷ Edward Said summarises this sentiment, arguing that the discourse of orientalism is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”³⁸ The critiques levelled at Pun and others who were appropriating and thereby changing aspects of Myanmar culture, came from a base judgement that they were doing so in a manner that was not in keeping with a particular idea of how Myanmar should develop. That idea of how Myanmar should develop, according to a discourse of Orientalism, indicates how political the changes wrought by Pun and his contemporaries were and why they were so vehemently opposed by the foreign media and observers in particular. The creatives were appropriating Myanmar culture and marked a break with traditional patterns of development. They were imagining a version of Myanmar that was for and patronised by primarily elite Myanmar people. It is likely that these young people will continue to create a hybridised version of Myanmar culture and global influences. But, it is less certain to what degree that world will be accessible to the wider Myanmar population.

The creatives’ cultural projects were appropriating Yangon city for elite purposes and represented the inexorable entrance of globalisation to Myanmar.³⁹ The arrival of fast food chains was maligned by some as the corrupting influence of globalisation rather than welcomed for the establishment of supply chains and the normalisation of the

³⁷ “Under the military, life may have been simpler: It was also grimmer, shorter and often sadder. Misplaced nostalgia for the old days misses the costs that came with long-term economic paralysis,” Nicholas Farrelly, ‘Misplaced Affection for the Old Days’, *The Myanmar Times*, March 7, 2016, <https://www.mmtimes.com/opinion/19345-misplaced-affection-for-the-old-days.html>.

³⁸ Edward Said, *The Edward Said Reader*, eds. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (Vintage Books: New York, 2000), 69.

³⁹ This also included the development of pipelines, dams, and deep-sea ports, see Lucy Hornby, “China and Myanmar Open Long-Delayed Oil Pipeline,” *Financial Times*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/21d5f650-1e6a-11e7-a454-ab04428977f9>; Yun Sun, “China, Myanmar Face Myitsone Dam Truths,” *Asia Times Online*, February 19, 2014, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-01-190214.html; Aung Hla Tun and Timothy McLaughlin, “China’s CITIC Wins Project to Develop Myanmar Economic Zone,” *Reuters*, December 31, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/myanmar-citic-project/chinas-citic-wins-projects-to-develop-myanmar-economic-zone-idUSL3N14K1D720151231>.

hospitality that they represented.⁴⁰ With critical separation and careful consideration of the various forms of social change underway in contemporary Myanmar, it is possible to delink these developments.⁴¹ The new generation was pushing cultural boundaries and bringing international trends to Myanmar. Some of them involved corruption, exploitation, and unsustainable development, however many also contributed to improvements in personal freedoms, including freedom of expression. By analysing the new generation elite young people, a more nuanced picture is revealed of the various facets of social and economic change in Myanmar.

The limits of fashion culture

In the fashion scene, another elite young man was imagining a new space for creativity and difference, and experimenting to reveal the infrastructure and cultural limits. Steven Oo was an established fashion designer in America. After 2013, he started spending more time in Myanmar vowing to start a fashion movement that valued originality and creativity, though he did not permanently repatriate. Ultimately, Steven Oo's vision was constrained by lacking infrastructure and he failed to realise his intent. Instead, Steven opened a retail store stocking foreign fashions, contributing to the increasing diversity of fashion available to the wider population. The fashion scene represented a site of experimental cultural change, aided by the end of international sanctions, the passage of the Foreign Investment Law, and spurred on by some key elite actors.

When Steven was growing up in Yangon he never considered fashion design as an option, and instead went to the University of California, Berkley with a plan to go into medicine. Once in America he was increasingly drawn to the fashion world and left the

⁴⁰ Farrelly, "Myanmar's middle-class bulge."

⁴¹ Marc Antrop, "Sustainable Landscapes: Contradiction, Fiction or Utopia?" *Landscape and Urban Planning* 75 (2006); Florian Steinberg, "Conservation and Rehabilitation of Urban Heritage in Developing Countries," *Habitat International* 20, no. 3 (1996).

University of California, Berkeley to complete a Master's degree in fine arts from the Academy of Art University, in San Francisco, graduating in 2010. After graduating he designed for prestigious international labels and created his own label, One Grey Day.⁴²

In 2013, Steven Oo stood out in Yangon as an impeccably groomed young fashion designer wearing sharply tailored structural clothing. Steven stood out even among other elite young people, and his vision was one of creative revolution and ground-breaking originality.⁴³ Steven said he wanted to “start something – a movement in fashion – where we encourage original designs.”⁴⁴ Fashion in Myanmar had long appropriated foreign trends and styles into local designs. Since the 1930s, young people in Myanmar had been adding modern signifiers, including new hair styles, high heel shoes, and handbags, to traditional outfits such as the *longyi*.⁴⁵ Rather than simply adding modern touches or elements to primarily traditional styles, Steven Oo wanted to develop a more complete modern Myanmar “fashion” that encompassed all elements of a total style. Steven said that when he returned to Myanmar the clothing available disappointed him, saying “A lot of the clothes here are the leftovers from other countries of past seasons. I don’t want my country to become the backend of fashion.”⁴⁶

However, when Steven arrived in Myanmar, he quickly became aware that he was not going to be able to relocate the production of his designer fashions there, due to lacking infrastructure, unreliable internet, and expensive international shipping rates. Fashion design and production in Myanmar had suffered severely from decades of international

⁴² Whitney Light, “String Theory,” *The Myanmar Times*, April 28, 2014, <https://www.mmtimes.com/lifestyle/10199-string-theory-original-style-comes-second-nature-to-designer-steven-oo.html>.

⁴³ Suzy Menkes, “Head of the Class,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/fashion/16iht-rstu.html>.

⁴⁴ Fieldwork notes, August 2013.

⁴⁵ Ikeya, “The ‘Traditional’ High Status of Women in Burma.”

⁴⁶ Fieldwork notes, August 2013.

sanctions,⁴⁷ the Internet was steadily improving but remained unreliable, and shipping routes were yet to be established and would have made posting his designs overseas unprofitable. While his drive and talents were rewarded in the international fashion world, they were not enough to realise his vision for Myanmar. Steven Oo was forced to open his factory in China and settle for opening a retail clothing store in Yangon, named “00:55.” 00:55 was a retail outlet that did not sell Steven’s designs, instead it sold mainstream brands of foreign styles of clothes, shoes, and accessories. 00:55 and similar retail stores that opened during this period were expensive compared to local fashions, but were increasingly accessible to the growing middle-class. After 2013, foreign designs and fashions were no longer accessible exclusively by wealthy young people.

An analysis of Steven’s experience during this period reveals the limits of Myanmar’s fashion culture: it was demanding increasingly foreign styles, but consumers were not yet demanding Myanmar designed high fashion, and the infrastructure was not developed enough to accommodate fashion production. Instead of improving high fashion or Myanmar-made production, Steven and others who opened retail stores in Myanmar instead brought Myanmar increased choice and a variety of foreign styles. Steven’s drive for creativity and originality was proven to be before its time in Myanmar, with only fashion-forward and engaged young people wearing his designs. Instead, the effect he did have on the market was to import foreign fashions and increase the availability of foreign designs and brands in Myanmar.

The popularity of 00:55 indicated a growing demand for foreign fashion cultures in Myanmar. Prior to 2013, foreign clothing trends remained somewhat out of reach to the majority of young people in Myanmar. Elite young people would go on overseas shopping trips, returning with the latest international fashions. As it became easier to get

⁴⁷ Kudo, “The Impact of U.S. Sanctions.”

a passport and the cost and frequency of commercial flights improved, more young people were able to travel and access foreign fashions. From these beginnings, stores such as 00:55 realised the demand for these fashions in Yangon, and retail stores opened and flourished. After 2013, Myanmar's fashion was a disparate mix of the foreign and the local. Young men and women would wear fashions with little regard for their location: they would wear insulated North Face puffer jackets, heavy jeans, and steel-toed boots, or Steven Oo's heavy knitwear, seemingly unaware of the stifling heat and tropical humidity. More commonly, young men and women's wardrobes included a variety of traditional Myanmar styles, such as *longyis* and velvet slippers, and foreign styles, such as jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers. Even older people increasingly wore Western-style shirts with their *longyis* or adopted trousers and closed shoes for work. Responding to increasing demand, tailors all over the city began making more "foreign" style Myanmar dress, in a variety of fabrics. For example, tailors would sew Western-style clothes out of Myanmar fabric, or, more commonly, would appropriate traditional Myanmar dresses into shorter skirts or more revealing designs. While foreign styles and fashion had been present in Myanmar for years, they became more widespread after 2013. The rise of creative tailors and fashion designers indicated a broader cultural shift of what could be considered Myanmar design and Myanmar dress.

Unlike Ivan Pun, Steven Oo did not receive much criticism. Perhaps he remained under the radar because he was only ever in the country for around a week at a time, or because he was not ostentatious when in Yangon. For example, when he was in Yangon he would catch local taxis. The sight of this perfectly manicured and tailored young man from a wealthy Myanmar family, springing from a decrepit Yangon taxi, to discuss the revolution of fashion he was plotting was discordant with his surrounds, and yet, not in the same flashy or conspicuous way that Ivan Pun or other elite young people were out

of place. Steven Oo's vision for Myanmar was less of a melding of the foreign and the local, and more of an attempt to transpose his America business onto Myanmar soil. Due in part to his globetrotting lifestyle, Steven was never in Myanmar long enough to cause too much of a stir, and he was more focused on creating his own fashion empire than an explicitly Myanmar one. While he may have been genuine in his desire to foment a fashion revolution, he was not the sole or the primary actor in doing so. Ultimately, changes to fashion culture were less tied to individual actors, and more the result of general processes of globalisation acting through consumers demanding those styles from local tailors.

Steven Oo and others in the fashion scene of Yangon introduced a variety of new foreign styles during this period. While foreign styles had accessorised local outfits for years, now young people took those influences further increasingly dressing in foreign styles or tailoring clothes that appropriated foreign influences into local fashion. Steven Oo returned to Myanmar and intended to spearhead a fashion movement that valued originality and creativity, but he was ultimately inhibited by lacking infrastructure and abandoned the plan. Instead of some elite led mediation, the rise of new fashion culture and styles were driven by the wider population, no longer the exclusive domain of the elite young people.

The global gay in Myanmar

The creative imaginants who were gay were exposed to global flows of queer cultures and influences.⁴⁸ Elite gay men, when compared to the experiences of non-elite gay men, were relatively insulated from the effects of discrimination in Myanmar.⁴⁹ While they

⁴⁸ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7, no. 4 (2001).

⁴⁹ For the preeminent study of categories of gay people in Myanmar, see David Gilbert, "Categorising Gender in Queer Yangon," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 28, no. 2 (July 2013).

faced judgement and criticism from those who dismissed their sexuality as facile attention seeking, this did not threaten their lives or livelihoods. As Jane Ferguson observed, “one important critique of work on sex and sexuality in Southeast Asia is that historically it has tended to overlook the connection between sexuality and class.”⁵⁰ Bobby Benedicto is an exception to this trend, arguing that in “spaces like Manila, axes like class enable dissimilar relationships with global circuits that in turn condition affective connections to ‘home’ and to the images, bodies, and subjectivities with which it has been articulated.”⁵¹ Benedicto argues that gay scenes reflect different connections to either local or global systems, and that the promotion of a “global gay” identity⁵² can lead to the “erasure” of the lower-class *bakla*, which is an Indonesian synonym for gay but that more accurately “conflates homosexuality, transvestism or effeminacy, and lower-class status.”⁵³ While these theorists are discussing access to certain identities as predicated on class, the qualities that are granting that access, wealth and foreign connections, were also markers of elite status in Myanmar. Similarities can be drawn between the *bakla* and the gay identities analysed by David Gilbert in Myanmar.⁵⁴

David Gilbert, a scholar of gay lives in Myanmar, provides an account of life for the majority of gay men in Myanmar. His description presents a picture that sits in stark contrast to and highlights the privilege of elite gay men. Gilbert argues that “*Anade*, or the culture of deferential respect, is a problem for transgender Burmese because it is fundamentally gender normative and involves the positioning of *opens* as inferior within

⁵⁰ Jane Ferguson, “Sexual Systems of Highland Burma/Thailand: Sex and gender perceptions of and from Shan male sex workers in northern Thailand,” *South East Asia Research* 22, no. 1 (2014), 27.

⁵¹ Bobby Benedicto, “The Haunting of Gay Manila: Global Space-Time and the Specter of *Kabaklaan*,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (2008).

⁵² Dennis Altman, “Global Gaze/Global Gays,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997); Dennis Altman, “Rupture or Continuity? The Internationalization of Gay Identities,” *Social Text* 48 (1996).

⁵³ Benedicto, “The Haunting of Gay Manila,” 319.

⁵⁴ David Gilbert, “Familial Transphobia and Kinship of Opens in Myanmar,” *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 18 (September 2015); David Gilbert, “Categorizing Gender in Queer Yangon,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 28, no. 2 (2013).

heteronormative Burmese society.”⁵⁵ Gilbert writes that while *opens*, who are males who act and appear feminine, are subject to oppression from the police and the legal system, the “more immediate causes of violence, shame and anguish for *opens* takes place within the family.”⁵⁶ These men experience a loss of social status as a result of their association with the feminine, and their families’ experience similar losses of social status. While the experience of *opens* analysed by Gilbert is not the same experience as that of elite young men, the attitude of Myanmar society towards gay people that Gilbert describes is a relevant description of the general sentiment faced by all gay people in Myanmar, including elite gay men.

Elite young Myanmar men can be seen as the product of international systems⁵⁷ rather than the heteronormative Myanmar society that Gilbert describes.⁵⁸ While heteronormative Myanmar society may direct violence, shame, and anguish towards gay men, elite young men were insulated from that sentiment by their familial wealth and influence. Elite young men were able to challenge Myanmar society’s heteronormative values by hybridising international systems with Myanmar cultures.⁵⁹ The popularity of Ar-T, an openly gay musician, was at the will of his audience who were primarily non-elite young people, indicating a shift in the country’s tolerance and embrace of gay men. In addition to support for his music, Ar-T was associated with regular events held in bars and nightclubs that were aimed at the LGBTQ community in Yangon. These events

⁵⁵ Gilbert, “Familial Transphobia.”

⁵⁶ Gilbert, “Familial Transphobia.”

⁵⁷ Or ‘Gay globalities’ as Benedicto calls the international gay identity, “The Haunting of Gay Manila,” 319.

⁵⁸ Lynette J. Chua and David Gilbert, “Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Minorities in Transition: LGBT Rights and Activism in Myanmar,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2015).

⁵⁹ Literature on performativity, identity, and belonging is extensive and crossing discipline boundaries between philosophy, anthropology, sociology, linguistic theory, and gender theory. A good introduction is Vikki Bell, “Performativity and Belonging: An Introduction,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (1999); belonging is also an important thread in queer theory, particularly in relation to much of Eastern Europe where “heteronormative nationalism” results in violence against the LGBTQ community, Hadley Renkin, “Homophobia and Queer Belonging in Hungary,” *Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology* 53 (2009).

enjoyed increasing support from non-elite Myanmar people, from their origins as primarily elite spaces for elite young Myanmar people and expatriates.

The distinction between elite and non-elite gay men's experiences in Myanmar was in contrast to that in neighbouring Thailand. As Peter Jackson has argued, Thai gay men from working-class backgrounds are less constrained by homophobic attitudes than the middle-classes.⁶⁰ Jackson attributes this in part to the greater proportion of ethnic-Chinese in the Thai middle-classes, and he says that Chinese Confucian culture is significantly more homophobic than Thai culture.⁶¹ In Myanmar, the heteronormative Myanmar culture results in the greater discrimination and constraints on non-elite gay men, compared to the more globalised and liberal culture of the elite gay men.

Recognising the different manifestations of gay identities in Asia, Peter Jackson argues for a revision of the notion that contemporary gays and their identities originated in the West, instead recognising the possibility that "these identities emerging by processes of parallel development in diverse locales."⁶² The expression of gender/sex difference in Myanmar was not a new phenomenon, but rather the change was to the ability to openly express that difference. As David Gilbert has detailed, the categories of gender in queer Yangon are considerably more nuanced than a simple reproduction or even adaption of Western-originated identities. Gilbert says it is a problem of "articulation, attribution and vocabulary," which he explains in relation to one of his informants, saying "Maung Maung knows who s/he is, who s/he is attracted to, what *image* s/he wants to have, all without aligning to a term that has an analogue in 'Western' discourse."⁶³ Identities are fluid, with multiple subject positions occupied simultaneously or depending on

⁶⁰ Peter Jackson, *First Queer Voices from Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 68.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² Peter Jackson, "Pre-Gay, Post-Queer," *Journal of Homosexuality* 40, no. 3-4 (2001), 4.

⁶³ Gilbert, "Categorizing Gender in Queer Yangon," 264, 245.

institutional applications.⁶⁴ The fluidity and complexity of sexual orientation and gender identity in Myanmar indicate the area as deserving of dedicated study.

An example of an elite practice, that appeared to be different to that described by David Gilbert,⁶⁵ was cross dressing that was on display at a “Fashion Press Conference” hosted by modelling agent John Lwin in 2012.⁶⁶ At the press conference, one cross dresser had a conventional man’s haircut, was wearing a traditional male *longyi* and collared shirt, but had mixed these conventionally masculine clothes with *thanaka* on their face and two diamond encrusted flower earrings. *Thanaka* is a paste made from ground tree bark, which is traditionally worn by Myanmar people. While young boys may wear *thanaka* in public, young men and adult men generally only wear *thanaka* at night or for utility as sunscreen on construction sites, for example. Its use for decorative effect, commonly painted into the shape of leaves, is generally reserved for children and women. The cross dresser at the fashion show was sitting next to a friend who had a similar haircut, a beard and no makeup, but was were wearing a dress and woman’s jewellery. One of the presenters sitting at the front of the press conference, was wearing a dress and high heels, holding a handbag, with a face covered in makeup and long hair, but they spoke in a deep and masculine voice betraying their birth assigned gender as male. These were not transgender people drawing on the Myanmar *nat kadam*s or spirit mediums,⁶⁷ nor were they the expression of animist beliefs at spirit festivals.⁶⁸ This was the only occasion that this style of cross dressing was witnessed, but it suggested there was an elite practice of

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 265.

⁶⁵ Personal communications with David Gilbert, 2013.

⁶⁶ Fieldwork notes, September 2012.

⁶⁷ Tamara Ho, “Transgender, Transgression, and Translation: A Cartography of *Nat Kadam*s: Notes on Gender and Spirituality within the Spirit Cult of Burma,” *Discourse* 31, no. 3 (2009); *Friends in High Places: the Art of Survival in Modern Day Burma*, directed by Lindsey Merrison (Documentary Educational Resources, 2001), DVD, 88 mins.

⁶⁸ Eli Coleman, Philip Colgan, and Louis Gooren, “Male Cross-Gender Behavior in Myanmar (Burma): A Description of the Acault,” *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 21, no. 3 (1992).

cross dressing occurring in the fashion world, which was quite different to that occurring in non-elite groups.⁶⁹ The way they were cross dressing seemed to be almost intentionally obvious and confrontational, and was all the more explicit with the choice of a very public forum in front of TV cameras and local media. This was not a foreign press conference, but a local one, conducted in both Myanmar and English language. The freedom to express themselves so publicly seemed to be conferred by their elite status and their association with fashion culture.

Elite young men enjoyed the ability to be gay and yet to be defined by more than their sexual orientation alone. Elite young men did not discuss or focus on their sexual orientation when describing their visions or what they were trying to achieve in Yangon. Some would discuss their relationships or boyfriends, or how their families had initially found out, but most did not express any all-consuming internal struggle nor did they feel compelled to rationalise their sexual orientation. Elite composition had changed by 2016, progressively accommodating openly gay men. This tolerance sits in stark contrast to the experiences of non-elite gay men in Myanmar, who were persecuted and attacked for their sexual orientation. The perceived need to continue to pander to the wider population's heteronormative attitudes may be responsible for some of the creative imaginants' decision to remain taciturn about their sexuality in interviews. As such, the process to destigmatise certain sexual orientations was an uneven one, and the experience a gay person would have in Myanmar remained contingent on access to financial and social protections.

⁶⁹ Ward Keeler, "Shifting Transversals: Trans Women's Move from Spirit Mediums to Beauty Work in Mandalay," *Ethnos* 81, no. 5 (2016).

Queering popular music

The identity of the global gay man entered Myanmar and gay men's sexual orientation came to denote foreignness and they could enjoy popularity and elite status as a result. In popular music culture, the experience of Ar-T reveals the complex interactions between local and international systems.⁷⁰ Ar-T was indicative of a relatively small yet increasingly influential movement in queer culture in Yangon. Ar-T and his contemporaries represented a minority elite identity and were introducing visible and openly gay identities into the mainstream popular culture. Their popularity extended beyond the gay communities, and they worked to mediate foreign influences into Myanmar popular culture. Ar-T worked to popularise his musical style while facing criticism for his provocative music videos and some questioning his sexual orientation as pretence.

Ar-T came from a wealthy family in Meiktila, which he left when he decided he could not face a life of working in his brother's business, as a sales and marketing manager at a cement factory. In 2009, Ar-T moved to Yangon. As a result of turning away from the family business, his family disowned him and refused to support him. Ar-T came out as a gay man after his relocation, something he said his family would never accept and that he had never told them. Ar-T was an almost unfailingly positive and energetic person, although he would express deep sadness about leaving his family and how he missed them. He said it was very difficult for him at first, and that he still went through periods of feeling low and outcast, especially when he received criticism about his music. He said he was motivated and driven to continue despite the challenges because he was doing something that needed to be done, that he was committed to bringing his style and identity into the mainstream in Myanmar.

⁷⁰ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Roland Robertson, "Globalisation or Glocalisation?" *Journal of International Communication* 18, no. 2 (2012).

Ar-T said he was Myanmar's first electronic dance musician and had to overcome several hurdles to become a popular artist in Myanmar, including introducing a new style of music and being an openly gay artist in the hip-hop community.⁷¹ Ar-T's first single, "To The Floor" was released in March 2010 but did not become popular until 2012 when processes of globalisation contributed to its acceptance and popularity when it was referenced to the growing popularity of the American artist Pitbull. Ar-T said the latency of the song's popularity was due to the unfamiliarity of its sound in Myanmar in 2010. He said that by 2012 the style of music was more mainstream as a result of the growing popularity of Pitbull's music in Myanmar. When Pitbull's music became popular in Myanmar, it socialised Myanmar people to a more electronic musical style, which Ar-T's music reflected.

Attitudes to popular music culture in Myanmar supports Appadurai's argument that "Americanization" is less worrisome to local cultures than "the fear of cultural absorption by polities of larger scale, especially those that are nearby."⁷² Ar-T and other creatives expressing their fear that Myanmar people would imitate and be subsumed by K-Pop culture, from South Korea. Ar-T was frequently compared to Korean musicians and styles, of which he said, "I am so angry because the fans think I am a big fan of Korean culture. I am not, I am inspired by the West." Ar-T preferred American influences over Korean ones, listing his influences as "Britney [Spears], Justin [Timberlake], Mariah Carey, Michael Jackson and Madonna." The nuances that Ar-T brought to this musical style were not recognisable to his Myanmar audience, who identified his style and music with the more familiar Pitbull and K-Pop.

⁷¹ Ar-T was arguably not the first of this style, with others identified by Heather MacLachlan as "nu electro hip-hop" likely predecessors of the style, *Burma's Pop Music Industry*, 60-61.

⁷² Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 32.

Criticism of Ar-T and other gay young men included accusations that they were parading a gay façade to express their new freedom of expression rather than a “genuine” sexual orientation.⁷³ One heterosexual young man said he thought “they [are] putting [their sexual orientation] on because it’s cool and because they can now,” going onto say that he had noticed increasing numbers of imposing “packs of gay guys roaming around the mall.” Similar claims of superficial or posing gay identities were also made against lesbian relationships and displays. Interestingly, unlike the criticism of non-elite gay people, the criticism of elite gay people was about deploying a façade of a gay identity for status – because it was “cool” and because it indicated their newfound freedom. For elite young people, portraying a gay identity carried cultural cache and status, and made the identity worthy of being emulated or faked.

The status or “coolness” of gay men can be seen as a result of increased exposure to processes of globalisation, which included images of the fashionable and popular gay man. Tom Boellstorff argues that “fragmentary encounters with mainstream media” shape local identities through a globalisation process he calls “dubbing cultures.”⁷⁴ He says the concept of dubbing cultures “provides one way to conceptualize the relationship between persons and the cultural logics through which they come to occupy subject positions under contemporary globalizing processes.”⁷⁵ Boellstorff specifically analyses how *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities in Indonesia have been shaped through mediations with mass media portrayals, yet his argument can be applied to processes in Myanmar and elsewhere. In Myanmar, the identity of the fashionable gay man was aligned with international systems through media portrayals and popular culture. Prior to 2012, gay men in Myanmar could only gain status from their sexual orientation if they were

⁷³ Fieldwork notes, November 2014.

⁷⁴ Boellstorff, *Dubbing Cultures*, 225.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 226.

transgender people who were considered *nat kadaws* or spirit mediums.⁷⁶ After 2012, displays of sexual orientation could gain status from their associations with international qualities or systems.

Ar-T's fame and notoriety increased in 2013, when he released a scandalous music video for his single "XOXO." The music video shows a group of young women dancing in an abandoned warehouse, in cut-off denim shorts with exposed midriffs. Flashing disco lights, and Ar-T playfully at the centre of the show, with a cheeky smile seemingly showing he knows exactly what he is doing and the reaction the video will illicit. After the video was released, Ar-T said "I want to tease the fan," elaborating that he wanted to tease them into enjoying new and more daring videos and music. He said that everyone "say it sucks, but everyone enjoys it," because they felt like they could not like it because it was too different and revolutionary, but that they secretly liked it. Ar-T said that he and his friends in the music video faced criticism, saying "some fans called me a prostitute." Ar-T said the young women in his video were his friends who did not tell their parents they were in the video. He said it was difficult to make the kinds of music videos he wanted to in Myanmar. Other artists and music producers also reported similar difficulties, and many resorted to filming their music videos in Singapore, where models and actresses were willing to wear revealing clothing and dance provocatively.

Ar-T dealt with the cultural inheritance of *copy thachin* (copy songs), analysed in Chapter 5, and was constrained by the Myanmar "pop industry trends toward continuation of the pop music tradition rather than toward developing something innovative beyond tradition."⁷⁷ Ar-T said he was consciously working to improve musical talent in order to influence the public to accept originality and different people, not just unchallenging

⁷⁶ Ho, "Transgender, Transgression, and Translation"; *Friends in High Places: the Art of Survival in Modern Day Burma*, Lindsey Merrison.

⁷⁷ MacLachlan, *Burma's Pop Music Industry*, 58.

musical sounds. He said it was important for musicians like himself to push their agenda of change and tolerance so that the population would come to accept individuals who were different, hoping that in time “they will love us, not only our music.”⁷⁸

Conclusion

The creative imaginants were highly motivated young men who were enthusiastically leading widespread changes to cultural expression in Myanmar. Unlike the other social groups of the new generation, these were individual young men creating new and clearly articulated imagined worlds. They set a cracking pace for cultural change, experimenting with and introducing foreign trends and styles into Myanmar. They introduced revolutionary new identities and styles that drew on global influences. The creatives worked to create spaces, styles, and identities that reflected who they were – including internationally minded, and openly gay young men – and how they were appropriating Myanmar culture.

Prior to 2010, the creative imaginants had been unwelcome in Myanmar society, and were driven overseas where they pursued their creative impulses. After 2012, the creatives seemed to perceive the formation of the new generation, the passage of the new Foreign Investment Law, and the lifting of many foreign sanctions as priming conditions in the country for their return. After their return, they started bringing their imagined worlds for Myanmar into reality. By 2014, they had opened a number of new bars, art galleries, and restaurants, and reimagined fashion and popular culture in the country. Ivan Pun changed the urban landscape of Myanmar and created new spaces for artistic expression in Myanmar. Steven Oo returned to Myanmar driven to revolutionise the country’s fashion culture. Ar-T challenged what could be shown in music videos and

⁷⁸ Ar-T, Fieldwork notes, July 2013.

what could be heard in Myanmar music. The creative imaginants had created new worlds through an uneven and unpredictable process of globalisation and imagination work. By 2016, some of their efforts appeared to have succeeded and a version of Yangon was forming that reflected their identities and elite qualities. These young men had created a world in Yangon where they belonged.

In the fashion scene, the uneven nature of this process and the limits of acceptable changes were revealed. Widespread changes were instigated, including foreign influences in local tailor-made clothes and more accessible foreign styles in new retail stores. However, infrastructure continued to be an impediment to certain developments, including preventing Steven Oo opening a Myanmar production facility. Instead, he opened the arguably more influential retail store 00:55 catering to a growing middle-class who were demanding foreign fashions. The rise of these retail stores and the increasingly foreign-influenced traditional Myanmar dress made by tailors in the city demonstrated the social and economic changes that had occurred by 2016.

By 2016, the creative imaginants had changed elite composition and practice in Yangon, introducing new clothing styles, various nightlife options, and diverse music styles. These young men presented the population with choices. They provided alternative spaces, lifestyles, and cultures for young people in Myanmar. For a country pulling itself out of poverty, the ability to move beyond day-to-day necessity to have the luxury to consider clothing styles and identities was remarkable and indicated a growing middle-class with increasing agency and freedom from their parents and their country's repressive history.⁷⁹ The creatives imagined new worlds in Myanmar, hybridising Myanmar cultures with foreign trends.

⁷⁹ Sanjay Gurung, Sasha Muench, and Jessica Wattman, *Visibility Versus Vulnerability: Understanding Instability and Opportunity in Myanmar* (Mercy Corps, May 2014).

Chapter 7

The Spectacle of *Thingyan*

Thingyan, or water festival, is a traditional Myanmar Buddhist lunar New Year festival. As the process of generational change took hold and elite young people exhibited their new practices in Yangon, *Thingyan* was transformed into a rite of passage for the new generation. The festivals of 2013, 2014, and 2015 were spectacles of the social and economic changes wrought during this period.¹ The five social groups researched in this thesis coalesced and joined the wider Myanmar population in celebrating *Thingyan*. In anthropology, festivals have been analysed as spaces where people can “create or re-appropriate, perform, and embody narratives and symbols of belonging” to “formulate or adapt narratives, reembedding a dramatically altered social life within a wider cosmology.”² In Myanmar during the period of generational change, *Thingyan* was a space where the new generation of elite young people performed and refined their new identities, reflecting the changes that occurred to elite practice and composition during this period. Elite young people used the festival as an annual rite of passage, when relationships would begin and end, musicians would have their popularity elevated or destroyed, and elite groups would curate parties to be talked about all year. As a key site of cultural performance and production, an analysis of *Thingyan* shows the continued valence of certain elite qualities and the acceptance of new practices into the elite space.

¹ Joao Leal, “Festivals, Group Making, Remaking and Unmaking,” *Ethnos* 81, no. 4 (2016).

² David Picard, “The Festive Frame: Festivals as Mediators for Social Change,” *Ethnos* 81, no. 4 (2016), 603.

The underground rappers had their cultural capital validated, and they were elevated onto stages.

Festivals can both unite and divide communities,³ and *Thingyan* during this period revealed the inequality and injustice of social and economic changes that were occurring. The spatial segregation of *Thingyan*, with elite people elevated onto stages and the non-elite on the streets below, revealed the persistent stratification of the population. The tensions of Myanmar society during this period are heightened and can be clearly read in the performance of *Thingyan*. The freedom to celebrate and party was accompanied by drug taking, alcohol abuse, and fighting.

The difference between the ways that elite and non-elite young women experienced *Thingyan* reveals the uneven progress of women's freedoms. Further, the government's responses to violence against women during the festival belied the government's apparent disconnect from social issues. After 2010, more young women partook in the festival as it became a key social event in the annual calendar. For elite young women, there were safe spaces for them to join the revelry – on stages with security guards – while for non-elite women *Thingyan* included a high risk of sexual assault. The high rates of gendered violence during the festival period reflected the alarming rates of violence against women in Myanmar society year-round. In 2015, the government initiated campaigns targeting antisocial behaviour during *Thingyan*, framing sexual assault as the result of the corrupting influence of foreign morals, and blaming female victims of sexual assault. Through these campaigns, the government created a rhetoric that the tradition of *Thingyan* was under threat from generational change. The government campaigns vilified young people as contributing to the deterioration of an imagined Myanmar culture and

³ Jeremy Boissevain, "The Dynamic Festival: Ritual, Regulation and Play in Changing Times," *Ethnos* 81, no. 4 (2016).

its values. In 2016, the celebration had been successfully controlled by these campaigns and elite young people celebrated the festivals of 2016 and 2017 off the streets in a purpose-built arena in Yangon. An analysis of *Thingyan* reveals the interplay of the new generation of elite young people with the wider population, Myanmar's cultural traditions, and state policies – creating a picture of complex interaction, performance, and production in this period of Myanmar's history.

Background to Thingyan

Thingyan is a four day long Buddhist lunar New Year celebration. *Thingyan* was originally celebrated according to a lunar calendar, on different dates each year, but in recent years it has occurred from 13 to 16 April each year. Despite the festival's eminence in the Myanmar Buddhist calendar, it suffers from a dearth of English language studies.⁴ The studies that exist primarily focus on its celebration in rural areas, by ethnic groups, or in diaspora communities,⁵ and centre on its religious or historical antecedents.⁶ The recent appropriation of the festival and its rapid growth into the largest festival celebrated in Yangon and Mandalay by elite young people has not been given attention equivalent to its cultural importance.

The origins of the festival have been identified in the *Vedas*, the scriptures of Hinduism from 1200 BCE to 100CE. The word *Thingyan* is drawn from the Sanskrit word, *thin-kan-da* or *sankmnta*, for transformation or change.⁷ In addition to its Vedic roots, there are

⁴ The absence of any reference to *Thingyan* in Andrew Selth's comprehensive surveys of Myanmar literature speaks volumes, see Selth, *Burma (Myanmar) since the 1988 Uprising*; Andrew Selth, "Modern Burma Studies: A Survey of the Field," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2010).

⁵ Hsin-chun Tasaw Lu, "Festivalizing Thingyan, Negotiating Ethnicity: Burmese Chinese Migrants in Taiwan," *Journal of Burma Studies* 12 (2008).

⁶ John Brohm, "Buddhism and Animism in a Burmese Village," *Journal of Asian Studies* 22, no. 2 (1 February 1963).

⁷ Sandar Lwin, "Thingyan: Explained," *The Myanmar Times*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.mmtimes.com/special-features/220-Thingyan-2016/19770-Thingyan-explained.html>.

legends of gods and historical tales of royal Bagan families partaking in water throwing.⁸ The four days of the festival that lead up to the Buddhist New Year's Day involve the symbolic cleansing of the past year by sprinkling scented water on people, carefully washing elderly peoples' feet, and bathing images of the Buddha. Aside from the dates and the importance of water, the version of the festival celebrated by many young people in Yangon had little resemblance to its origins, instead it was a four-day long party of intoxicants, music, and conspicuous consumption.

The author attended three *Thingyan* festivals in Yangon,⁹ spoke to young people about their experiences from past years, and looked through their photos and videos. This research found that the high points of unbridled elite young people celebrating *Thingyan* were the festivals of 2013, 2014, and 2015.¹⁰ Since the 2015 festival, the government stepped up its efforts to enforce some control over the festival, banning commercial stages, removing contraception from stores, threatening to arrest young women dressed in revealing clothing, and deploying more police to target public intoxication and antisocial behaviour. After 2016, commercial stages were banned from public roads and the main celebration for young people was a single music event in a purpose-built entertainment park.¹¹ The festivals of 2013, 2014, and 2015 represented a period when the new generation of elite young people was able to commandeer the traditional festival to exhibit their wildest dreams of partying and celebration. During these three years, the

⁸ Elizabeth Miller, "Thingyan: Translating the Invented Tradition of the Burmese Water Festival," (PhD dissertation, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, 2015) *ProQuest LLC*.

⁹ The author attended the festivals of 2013, 2014, and 2015.

¹⁰ The appropriation of an otherwise relatively tame festival, incorporating widespread alcohol consumption and partying, occurred prior to 2010 although it reached a fever pitch from 2012-2014. The International Herald Tribune, "In Myanmar, Celebrating with Water, Letting off Steam," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/17/world/asia/17yangon.html>.

¹¹ In 2017, the main *Thingyan* festival occurred as a single music festival organised by H-Life Entertainment, called Thingyan Music Festival (TMF), in the purpose built Thuwunna Bhumi Event Park. Official partners of the event included Balance Fitness gym, CB Bank, Ooredoo telecom, SPY Wine Cooler, Myanmar Premium beer, and Kiss Mojo Premium Condoms. Tickets for four days general admission and VIP packages cost between 80,000 and 200,000 kyats (US\$80-200). There were also limited VVIP and Villa packages. The TMF Facebook page was liked and followed by over 115,000 people, www.facebook.com/Thingyanmusicfestival/.

festivals were a display of foreign influences and unbridled conspicuous consumption appropriating a traditional Myanmar festival as an outlet for elite young people's desires. The festival was a shared social site for the five types of elite young people researched. Myanmar people's different lived experiences of the festival reveal the competing cultural and social structures present during this period of Myanmar's transformation.

A celebration of the new generation

In 2013, the author first experienced the excitement and anticipation of *Thingyan* in Yangon alongside some young people. From 9 am on the morning of day one, a steady stream of young Myanmar friends began arriving at the author's apartment. The young people were dressed in the latest fashions with watertight pouches on lanyards around their necks to keep their phones and valuables dry. The young women were wearing full faces of waterproof makeup. On their phones, they spent the next two hours organising the day's itinerary – when and who they were meeting, which stages they would go to, what time different artists were playing, and so on. Their excitement was palpable and had been building for weeks as they organised passes to different stages, coordinated their outfits, and formed their crews. The young people drank cans of RedBull energy drinks – some spiked their cans with whiskey – while they spoke about what to expect and how to navigate the crowds. “It's crazy” and “it's so much fun” was a general sentiment, but there were also some warnings, “stay close to us when we are walking to the stages. There are always loads of drunks on the streets and in cars who have a go at the girls,” but “we won't be on the streets long before we get to the stages, where we will be safe.” Everyone did a final check that they had their stage passes, donned baseball caps from a local hip-hop clothing label “Run YGN,” sealed their phones and money into watertight pouches, and headed out into the street.

In the street, the group hailed taxis and headed for the next meeting spot. Not all taxis operated on *Thingyan* because of the damage carrying soaking wet revellers could do to their cars, but those who did had their cars completely sealed in plastic – the seats, floor, roof, and electronic consoles – and they were rewarded with fares that could be between four and ten times the usual rates. The taxi drove along some back streets where young children threw buckets of water on the car, and along some main streets that were starting to become clogged with traffic. The taxi dropped the group off at the Sayasan Teashop (see Map 2). The Sayasan Teashop was on Sayasan Road and was normally only busy in the late night or early morning but during *Thingyan* was bustling all day with party goers. Part of the Teashop was a dirt carpark filled with foldable tables and plastic chairs, while the other half was a concrete floored space with heavy wooden tables and benches. The group sat at a wooden table and waiters delivered cold beers, snacks, water, and energy drinks. The atmosphere in the Teashop was excited and young people filled all the tables, laughing and excitedly discussing their plans for the days ahead.

After about an hour it was time to head to the stages, and the group walked into the carpark where one of the young men had parked his “*Thingyan* car.” The *Thingyan* car was an old sedan with its roof and windscreen roughly sawn off to make it a crude convertible. The seatbelts had apparently been lost in this conversion, and a tangle of ropes had been tied over the seats for everyone to hold onto. It was a sight to behold, even more so when eight young people piled into it, sitting on the back of the chairs, the boot, and the doors hanging onto ropes with their legs dangling over the sides. Those who did not fit in the car jumped into taxis and everyone headed for the stages on Kaba Aye Pagoda Road. The Mad Max *Thingyan* car took a scenic route so that everyone could be doused in water from some small roadside stalls where children and families would throw buckets of water on passing cars. The young man who owned the car was the son

of a wealthy Yangon businessman, who had recently moved to Bangkok for university but came home to Yangon for holidays. He normally drove around town in a red convertible sports car and his decision to buy a sedan and mutilate it only to drive it four days a year was indicative of his disposable income and reflected the effort that some elite young people would put into standing out during *Thingyan*.

At midday, the group arrived at the end of Kaba Aye Pagoda Road. It was impossible to drive down the road, as it was already clogged with pick-up trucks full of Myanmar people looking to get drenched in water from the stages while drinking and dancing to the music blaring from their speakers and the stages. Everyone scrambled out of the car and the taxis, and prepared to enter the insanity that was Kaba Aye Pagoda Road: checking phones were safely sealed, hats and sunglasses were on, and young women safely positioned in the middle of the group. Young kids ran between the cars, selling cigarettes, ice cold bottles of water to pour on people, snacks, cans of fake snow spray, water-proof phone pouches, and other necessities. Makeshift stalls had popped up along the sides of the road, selling merchandise, food, and drinks. The group weaved through the crowds and stationary cars, people sitting in the back of pick-up trucks threw water on them, sprayed fake snow, and occasionally surprised them with an ice-cold bottle of water down their backs. Even though it was early on the first day of *Thingyan*, the atmosphere was already intense and many were already red-eyed, soaking wet, and in a party mood. After ten minutes weaving through traffic, the group walked through an entranceway off the side of the road, flashed their passes, and found themselves in the safety and relative calm of the downstairs grass area of a stage. Everyone rested for a moment away from the crush of cars and the pouring water, sitting on chairs, checking phones, drinking beers, and lighting up cigarettes. Looking up at the stage, everyone seemed to be mentally preparing to ascend the stairs and enter the next level of the

Thingyan experience – the blaring music, flashing lights, and steady flow of young people inviting patrons upstairs and onto the stage. Someone asked, “you ready?” and the others yelled “*twar mel*” (“Let’s go!”), and everyone went up the stairs, entering the pinnacle site of the elite new generation’s experience of *Thingyan*: the *mandat*, or stage.

Up to this moment, the experience of *Thingyan* for elite young people was somewhat similar. However, the diversity of the stages represented a spectrum of identities that existed in Myanmar during this period. Festivals are ritual ceremonial events that invite anthropological attention for their contradictory and complex nature, when a society performs and produces its culture.¹² Debate exists whether festivals are a “locus for radical transgression, or simply an escape valve for revolutionary energy.”¹³ Festivals often involve the relaxing or complete liberation from usual social codes, allowing a population to freely celebrate and express themselves. The celebratory and uniting side of festivals is countered by the view that they are only momentary reprieves from hierarchy and social divisions, and festivals only work to momentarily alleviate tensions in order to ensure the continuance of the status quo.¹⁴ By analysing a society’s festivals, it is possible to reveal the processes through which social hierarchies are negotiated and reinforced, cultures are performed and recreated, and morality is expressed and challenged.

From 2010 to 2013, water festival grew in size and intensity each year, culminating in 2013 as the most anticipated party of the year for young people in Yangon. While the way the majority of the population celebrated was largely unchanged, in the back of pick-up trucks and at small roadside stalls with buckets and hoses, the way the elite young

¹² Nicola Frost, “Anthropology and Festivals: Festival Ecologies,” *Ethnos Journal of Anthropology* 81, no. 4 (2016); Tomas Pernecky, “Preface: What and When is an ‘Event?’ A Short Prelude to Event Studies,” in *Approaches and Methods in Event Studies*, ed. Tomas Pernecky (Routledge: Oxon and New York, 2016), xvi.

¹³ Frost, “Anthropology and Festivals,” 572.

¹⁴ Frost, “Anthropology and Festivals.”

people celebrated benefitted from significant investments in the construction imposing temporary stages. The stages were of varying sizes, but were all on stilts looming between five and ten meters above the road. These stages lined some of the main roads of Yangon which were congested with pick-up trucks full of people who spent the four days driving in front of the stages getting sprayed with water from the stages. The roads were lined with stages armed with hundreds of hoses pumping water from the lakes, stage patrons would man these for the four days, spraying arcs of water at those in cars and on foot below. The stages were also covered in elaborate sprinkler systems to ensure all patrons stayed wet during the festivities. The stages had their own bars, DJs, live performers, dance floors, and VIP areas. While there were various free and government-sponsored stages, the majority of the stages preferred by elite young people were commercial and expensive. Tickets were between 20,000 kyat (around US\$20) for one-day tickets, to upwards of 400,000 kyat (US\$400) for four day VIP passes. Most young people would buy tickets ahead of time, choosing stages that appealed to the kind of *Thingyan* experience they wanted.

Staging new elite identities and styles

During *Thingyan*, music became an important element in the elite celebrations, and the underground rappers solidified and displayed their elite status. Many of the largest and most popular of the stages were those that had programs full of underground rappers. In addition to the new power of the underground rappers were the abundance of international musicians, who were also very popular and drew sizeable crowds. The underground rappers and international DJs were on the most coveted stages, and the enormous size, prime locations, and exorbitant prices of those stages reflected the popular support for these new cultural performers. To support the argument that a new generation of elite young people developed during this period, and heralded a variety of

new identities and styles, this section provides a sense of the different stages, styles and types of elite capital that were on display during *Thingyan* between 2013 and 2015.

Each stage seemed created around a single dominant quality or style. For example, some stages were organised around a particular music culture, either hip-hop or rock and roll. Other stages were focused on creating an environment for experiencing the effects of methamphetamine intoxication. Other stages advertised their heavy security in order to attract young men and women interested in posing, flirting, and socialising. The favoured intoxicants differed by stages also, with alcohol or drug choice indicative of an individual's social group. The hip-hop stages included some marijuana smoking, while the invite-only stages were more reliable for cocaine or imported amphetamine (ecstasy) consumption. Most stages had at least one VIP area, if not two or three grades. The VIP areas were generally water free, without sprinklers, allowing young women and men to stay dry and composed, while they accessed the VIP bars and toilets without having to wait in long lines. Each stage created its own party, curated towards different identities depending on their management and clientele.¹⁵

Festival stages were erected swiftly in the week prior to the celebrations. Wealthy young people and businessmen would fund the stages, curating musical performances, flying in international DJs, stocking bars full of sponsored alcohol, and setting up complex water systems. Each stage would create a concept and entice individuals who were drawn to the experience that they promised. Five types of stages are described below: the more commercial stages with international DJs; frenetic illicit drug taking stages; harder rock and roll music stages; local underground hip-hop music focussed; and exclusive invite-only stages. Elite young people used the space that *Thingyan* presented, as both a period of relatively relaxed moral standards and tolerance of spirited youthful expression, to

¹⁵ Leal, "Festivals, Group Making, Remaking and Unmaking."

create and patronise stages that reflected their identities, spending the four days displaying and shaping their identities for the year ahead.

The pop culture stages catered to young men and women concerned about maintaining their reputation, including young people in steady relationships, while partaking in the festivities. These stages had international DJs or commercial hip-hop artists, including Sai Sai, Bunny Phyo, and Bobby Soxer, and young people would wear their best imported foreign fashion styles. These stages were relatively inwards focussed. Where other stages had performers on the edge of the stages facing out to the streets, performing to the cars driving past, with hoses lining the edges for young people to interact with those driving past, the commercial stages would have DJs in waterproof boxes at the rear of the stage and the audience would face away from the street. On these stages, young men and women were focussed on socialising with one another rather than interacting with the wider Myanmar population below. These stages were in some ways the dayclubs of *Thingyan*. They were relatively safe spaces in the midst of the intensity of the festival.

On one of these stages, young women stood at the edges of the dancefloor, out of the reach of the sprinkler systems drenching those on the dancefloors. From this vantage point, young women would survey the scene and wait for young men to approach them to strike up a flirtation and test the waters. Generally young women would know some of the young men at the stages, friendship groups of young women often had equivalent friendship groups of young men linked by a steady relationship between one of the young women and one of the young men, or they went to school or university together. Sometimes they would know one another from Facebook, where they would have staged the flirtatious grounds for potential relationships that would be realised during *Thingyan* on these stages. Many of these young men and women would gradually pair off during the four days, and by day four they would be standing holding hands or with their arms

around one another to the side of the dance floor. For existing relationships, *Thingyan* could be a hotbed of drama and fighting – young men would be accused of being flirtatious with other young women, or young men would get jealous and suspicious if their girlfriends knew too many young men, indicating that they were talking to young men in Facebook chats or phone messages. The tide of relationships would either swell and a relationship would be formed or strengthened, or it would turn and relationships would end and young people would be left sad and lonely by day four of *Thingyan*. The main relationship production and performance occurred on these inwards facing commercial stages.

The next style of stage, in stark contrast to the commercial stage, was the frenetic illicit drug taking stage. These stages were dark and exuded a “hard” edge, with heavily tattooed and pierced young men thrashing wildly and not drinking much alcohol. The young men on these stages appeared to be under the influence of methamphetamines, or, as some called the methamphetamine pills that they smoked, “*yama*.”¹⁶ Due to the heavy penalties for drug taking in Myanmar, young people who were consuming drugs would primarily confine the actual practice of taking drugs to their homes. It was also a relatively complicated process to consume methamphetamines, as Myanmar people preferred to smoke the *yama* pills, rather than eat them. Accordingly, it was very rare to see young people actually taking *yama*, but the effects were highly visible – the shaking hands, the erratic speech, the constant movement, profuse sweating, and chain-smoking cigarettes.¹⁷ One way to determine if a particular stage was under the influence of *yama*

¹⁶ Methamphetamine pills were referred to as “*yama*” which young men said was because they were called “*yaba*” in Thailand so the “m” instead of the “b” was for Myanmar. Others called them “strawberries” due to their often pink or red colouring and as a result of additives that made them smell like berries. They were less frequently called nazi speed or nazi chocolate.

¹⁷ Methamphetamine use also contributed to more serious behavioural issues and health impacts, including as paranoia, psychosis, hallucinations, violent behavior, neurological damage and arrhythmias. See Mary-Lynn Brecht et al, “Methamphetamine Use Behaviour and Gender Differences,” *Addictive Behaviors* 29, no. 1 (January 2004).

was to look at the lines for the bar. Young people who were on *yama* often drank little or no alcohol, instead clutching water bottles.

The illicit drug taking stages were more chaotic than the commercial stages, with heavy mesh obscuring the stages from street view and tarpaulins blocking out much of the daylight. The music would be heavy pulsating electronica, and young men would thrash around in constant erratic movement. There was none of the carefully curated courtships occurring on the margins of these stages, unlike that on the commercial stages, and any young women on these stages appeared to also be on *yama* in sweaty embraces with young men, or appeared to be timid young women who had come along with their boyfriends and seemed to be somewhat at a loss about what they were witnessing.¹⁸ The young men and women on these stages had chosen them in the weeks before, knowing the atmosphere would be dark and heady *yama* dens because the organisers were known to them personally or for their reputations in past years. Most young people knew the organisers of stages, and often tickets would be purchased directly from the organisers who would advertise through their friendship networks, including through Facebook. With the unifying of the festival into one main event after 2016, promotional material for the event explicitly banned drug use and patrons were searched on entry into the event.¹⁹

From the outside, the rock and roll style music stages resembled the illicit drug stages, although on closer inspection it was apparent that these stages were far more music focussed and there was less *yama* intoxication. These stages featured popular rock and

¹⁸ For a suggestive tentative study of methamphetamine use by young men and women in Myanmar see Yu Mon Saw et al, "Gender Difference in Early Initiation of Methamphetamine Users in Muse, Northern Shan State, Myanmar," *Harm Reduction Journal* 14, no. 21 (2017).

¹⁹ In 2017, the advertising for the Thingyan Music Festival (TMF) included explicit messages saying drug abuse would not be tolerated, and young people were searched entering the park. Of course, this would arguably be ineffective at combating *yama* use which occurred prior to arriving at the event and it was rare for young people to carry drugs on their person. It would be more effective at finding other illicit drugs, such as ecstasy and cocaine which may be carried in to be taken throughout the day.

roll *copy thachin* bands, such as Iron Cross.²⁰ Elite young people who were more nationalistic in their tendencies, preferring local Myanmar music and alcohol, flocked to these stages. These stages would have several levels of VIP areas where elite young people could indicate their status in relation to their contemporaries. As with the usual night-time behaviours of elite young people, particularly the Yakuza, these stages were focussed on heavy drinking, smoking, and some marijuana use.

Young men and the more promiscuous young women frequented these stages. These stages were less accommodating of the virginal young women, and young men who were accompanied by their girlfriends would tend to stay away from the rock and roll stages. These stages were more targeted towards heavy drinking and mosh pits, with young women and relationships a secondary consideration. While no sex workers were witnessed on stages during *Thingyan*, the sense was that they could be sought after the day's festivities rather than on the stages. Some young men would go out after the stages closed at 6 pm, to bars and food halls where sex workers could be picked up. Overall though, the focus of these stages was on drinking and listening to rock and roll music.

Water festival was the most important time of the year for underground hip-hop artists. Securing a performance at a prime time on a large stage was invaluable for setting themselves up as a popular artist in the year ahead. Artists would often play on multiple stages over the four days and were either paid for their performances, received free tickets and drinks, or performed solely for the exposure. The stages that curated a constant stream of performances over the four days were street facing and the passing pick-up trucks full of people would stop in front of these stages to take in the show. The stages generally included a platform that would jut out over the street edge to allow the

²⁰ For more on heavy metal in Myanmar, see Heather MacLachlan, "(Mis)representation of Burmese metal music in the western media," *Metal Music Studies* 2, no. 3 (2016).

artists to perform out for the audience below. The majority of young people on these stages were hip-hop fans, and they were also performing for the wider public – standing at the edges of the stage, dancing for the crowds below, or on hoses spraying the street in time to the music. As with the underground rappers analysed in Chapter 5, the performers and their on-stage audience were engaging with the crowd below. When artists were not performing, they would be in reserved “artists only” areas that would often be on a second storey of the stages.

One year, one of the hip-hop stages had an enormous motorbike in the middle of the stage, flanked by two performing stages that jugged out over the street below. The organisers had a carefully curated four days’ worth of live performances by established and up-and-coming hip-hop artists. The fame and popularity of an artist was reflected in the time slot that they received, with the lesser-known newcomers playing earlier in the day and generally only on day one and two. By day three and four the festival reached its highest pitch and timeslots were reserved for more established and famous artists. On the circuit of Yangon’s lakes, the loud and imposing hip-hop stages were the cultural and musical heartbeat of *Thingyan*, with engrossed audiences watching performers set the tone for the coming year’s musical styles and cultural icons.

The final type of stage was the exclusive invite-only stage. The elite new generation of crony families organised exclusive stages under the banners of their parents’ business conglomerations, such as the AirBagan and Htoo company stages organised by Tay Za’s sons. Unlike other stages, it was generally not possible to buy tickets to these stages and entrance was strictly by invitation only. These stages were patronised by the business elite of Yangon, foreign business partners, international school friends, socialites, and entertainers. International DJ’s provided the soundtrack and professional photographers documented the four days, with drones hovering overhead. Reports surfaced that these

stages were full service, including high class imported illicit drugs such as ecstasy and cocaine. Everything about these stages was designed to exude the patrons' exclusivity and privileged status, not just above the Myanmar population swelling past on the roads below but set apart even from elite people who were forced to pay for their entrance on other stages.

For elite young people, *Thingyan* was a chance to dress up, socialise, and display their status and privilege to all of Myanmar on the various stages, including the five types described here. The rest of the year they were confined to bars, nightclubs, social media, and other elite spaces where they were largely shielded from the wider population's view. During *Thingyan*, they were elevated onto stages where they paraded themselves in front of the crowds below in the daytime on this sanctimonious Buddhist holiday. The different focus of the stages – with some designed to be street-facing to allow performers and patrons to celebrate with those on the streets below while others faced away from the population – indicated the different attitudes to the wider population among elite young people. The hip-hop artists put on a concert for the population and the streets, reputation-conscious young men and women would face inwards and isolate themselves from the population, and the cronies barred themselves against even other elite young people who they did not deem on their level. These performances and the physical elevation and separation of elite young people from the wider population reveal the continued stratification of Myanmar society, even with the advent of widespread generational change and the appropriation of the *Thingyan* festival as a celebration of young people and their expression.

Reflections on social stratification

Thingyan was the key social event for intense and concentrated displays of young Myanmar people's proclivity for wild partying and conspicuous consumption. It was also a highly stratified event, with elite young people and wealthy businessmen on stages elevated above the rest of the population spending their days drenching the population below with hoses while drinking cold beer and dancing from the safety of the stages. The stages lined the two main streets of celebration, Nat Mauk Road and Kaba Aye Pagoda Road, which abut Yangon's two lakes, Kandawgyi Lake and Inya Lake (see Map 3). Water was pumped from the two lakes into their elaborate sprinkler systems and web of hoses. After the festival, the lakes would be low for weeks, the parks a muddy mess, and the roads full of debris and mud. The lakes were literally drained for elite people to blast the non-elite for four days in a festival that left the city a ravaged muddy mess.

Thingyan provides insights into the power struggles central to the country's social structures.²¹ Water festival was historically associated with cleansing the sins of the past year by pouring water on one another. The festival was lauded as one of the only times in the year when Myanmar's people suspended their deference to order and state authority, and instead danced and celebrated as equals.²² The reality, however, was that water festival was replete with reminders of the country's strict hierarchy and stratification, with elite young people on stages and the rest of the population confined to the streets below.²³

²¹ Tomas Pernecky, "The Making of Societies through Events: On Ideology, Power and Consent," in *Ideological, Social and Cultural Aspects of Events*, eds. Omar Moufakkir and Tomas Pernecky, (Oxfordshire and Boston: CABI, 2014), 28.

²² The military did attempt to control the events or promote nation building in the past, though the festival maintained its relative freedom from total state control. See Janette Philp and David Mercer, "Politicised Pagodas and Veiled Resistance: Contested Urban Space in Burma," *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (2002), 1594.

²³ Mauss, *The Gift*, 101-102.



Map 3. Thingyan water festival sites

The distinction between the elite and the rest was the result of inherited elite qualities, and the distinctions between different elite groups that were the result of generational change leading to new cultures and identities.

Standing on the edge of a stage on Kaba Aye Pagoda Road holding hoses and spraying the cars of people celebrating in the backs of pick-up trucks, people on the stages felt connected to those on the streets below. Laughing and dancing to the same music blaring from the stage's speakers, those on hoses responded to signals from the people in cars below to wet them. The enthusiasm and energy of those on the hoses was shared with those in cars below, and for a moment everyone forgot about the distance between them. At any moment though it could take a turn and everyone on the hoses would collectively decide, without speaking, to target one person below. The giant fire hoses that required three people to hold would turn and blast someone aggressively for longer than could possibly be comfortable or fun. It was no longer about celebrating together, but about asserting dominance over those below, reminding them of their subordinate position at the mercy of those on the hoses above.

There is something more that can be read into the diversity and inequality of different people's experiences of *Thingyan*. It was not only money that prevented non-elite people from celebrating the festival from the stages, but different sentiments motivated their celebration. The new generation of elite young people preferred safe spaces curated for the optimal display of their various identities, while the rest of the population used the festival as an excuse for public intoxication and irresponsible behaviour. The motivation for elite young people was to produce and perform particular identities in front of their contemporaries. For the non-elite people on the streets, *Thingyan* was a time of the year when they could forget their troubles, drink heavily, and dance with abandon. These

were two different experiences and displays: one to display an identity, the other to forget their responsibilities and lives.

The gross inequality of the festival was apparent when someone would be walking on the streets, only to be almost blasted off their feet or have an eardrum perforated by a fire hose cannon. Young people wielding hoses on stages revealed an undercurrent of malice when they united and turned all their hoses on one person, who would cower and protect their faces against the violent drenching. Thousands of arcs of water pouring out from stages, drenching truckloads of people stuck in intentional gridlock, waiting patiently for their turn for a good wash. Those on the streets remained down there, rarely challenging security on the stages or getting upset by the traffic. Water festival was a four-day performance that laid bare the inequalities of Myanmar society, which continued despite the period of generational, social, and economic changes.

Yangon and Mandalay were the major city sites of the festivities, but the country as a whole would largely shut down over this period. The Myanmar government would close, and many shops and services would shutter, adhering to public holidays. For those in the population who chose to stay at home for the four days, their activities and movements were confined to their homes and local streets. The grocery stores were inundated with families stocking up on food and essentials in the days preceding the holiday. Deliveries of drinking water would surge as households bought enough water to see them through the holiday. Many families would stay indoors or partake in small festivities on local streets, with children playfully throwing water on one another. These smaller scale localised celebrations were reminiscent of the festival's origins, and were more tame affairs of family fun and play.²⁴

²⁴ Matt Carney, "Surviving Thingyan," *New Mandala*, April 24, 2015, <http://www.newmandala.org/surviving-Thingyan/>.

Elite young people capitalised on the government's tolerance for the festival and the increased desires for foreign styled displays of excessive partying. They used the freedom that the public holidays presented and the space of Yangon city to create a four-day extravaganza of youth culture laid bare. While many in the existing generation expressed disdain or disapproval for the festival's descent into intoxication, the continued adherence to the public holidays, the permission to erect expensive stages catering to the revellers, and the acceptance that the festival would shut down the city's usual functions provided ample space for elite young people to parade their newly developing cultures, morals, identities, and styles during this period. *Thingyan* represented an intense and concentrated display of the broader incursions of elite young people and the new generation on the existing generation's ways of living. Despite state attempts to control or stop these displays – with the 2016 banning commercial stages from public streets or the 2015 attempts to control what clothing young women could wear during the period – the festival continued due to continued public demand, albeit on a more refined scale and confined to entertainment parks.

Violence against women and vilifying change

For young women, *Thingyan* could be an exciting time of year for courtships, flirtations, and making steady relationships public. It was also a dangerous time, when sexual assaults were common and violence against women was fuelled by increased alcohol consumption and abandoned inhibitions. The key determinant in the kind of experience that a young woman could expect was whether she was elite or not. Elite young women had access to more reserved and safe spaces to celebrate *Thingyan*. Two stages are described that appealed to elite young women, one that was less intense, with less alcohol inebriation and no visible drug intoxication, and the other that was advertised as having a heavy security presence. On these stages, young women were free to celebrate the festival

and have fun in a relatively safe and secure atmosphere. Comparatively, the non-elite woman's experience of *Thingyan* was restricted, and women who celebrated on the streets faced the threat of sexual assault and violence. The government launched campaigns in 2015 that blamed young women and foreign influences for gendered violence during *Thingyan*, but evidence from past decades suggests that violence against women, including domestic violence, is an enduring social problem.

In 2014, the Balance Fitness stage was run by one of Yangon's exclusive new gyms and was located on Kandawgyi Lake, backing onto the grounds of a mansion. The stage had a pool, foam machines, DJs, and laser lights. The stage jutted off the hill at the back of the large property, and the gardens of the house were transformed into a mini water festival with games and trampolines for those so inclined, or quiet areas with chairs to sit on and relax. The mansion had several bathrooms where young women went to touch up their makeup and go to the toilet. Proper toilets were a luxury at *Thingyan* and even the other elite stages only had portable toilets that would quickly become putrid and be overflowing by the end of day one. The atmosphere of the Balance Fitness stage and gardens was unlike the inescapable intensity of other stages that did not have these garden areas and was a world apart from the experience of those on the streets below. Young women could remain relatively dry and even arrive via backstreets to the house, allowing them to completely avoid the crush of the streets. Many of the young people on this stage knew one another from the Balance Fitness gym, and the stage was full of taunt young bodies from working out and embracing the fitness trend that was growing in Yangon during this period.

On another stage that was heavy with security guards and high fences, some young women said they were there to "meet cute boys" and "find boyfriends." The young men on this stage were relatively well behaved and said they were there to socialise with young

women and make a good impression, rather than to partake in hard partying with male friends like on other stages. The young women would stay to the edges of the stage, out of the water, and young men would buy them drinks and dote on them. Some were already in relationships and *Thingyan* was a fertile site for the performance of their love, with endless “selfies,”²⁵ and constant displays of affection, such as handholding, signalling to everyone that they were together. Other young women who were single would spend the four days gradually developing relationships with young men, and by day three or four many would be in new relationships. A significant number of new relationships began during *Thingyan*, as one of the few events when almost all the young men and women of Yangon would be guaranteed to be out and looking for love. Asking a young couple when they met one another would often be answered by “*Thingyan*, [year].”

Some young women would not attend *Thingyan* or would only attend for one day or a partial day if they were in long term relationships. Relationships between elite young people often involved some time as long-distance lovers, while one partner went to university abroad. If this were the case, unless the partner was in Yangon and attended the festival with their girlfriend or boyfriend, they would be expected to stay home or if they attended it would be with a trusted chaperone and under almost constant surveillance by the absent partner. Overall, attending an event such as *Thingyan*, known for its flirtation and intoxication was fraught with danger for a long-term couple and many choose to stay home because it was simply too risky to their relationships to go. As analysed in Chapter 4, the mistrust and constant need for proof of love in many Myanmar relationships meant that attending *Thingyan*, as a site of known frivolity and

²⁵ Slang for a self-portrait taken on a phone’s camera, using a front facing camera.

romantic entanglements, required a cautious approach and many chose to stay home and avoid the drama.

Beyond the danger of rumours of infidelity and flirtation, *Thingyan* was also a period of increased risk of sexual assault and violence. The marked difference of opportunities for elite and non-elite young women was highlighted during *Thingyan*. The pervasive violence against women and a government unwilling or unable to develop effective campaigns to address the underlying causes was alarming. Ultimately, attempts to blame the destructive influence of foreign cultures and systems was shown to be unconvincing when compared to the experience of elite young women who were arguably exposed to far more foreign influences. The changes to *Thingyan*, however, offer a warning of how existing social issues can be exacerbated by unchecked rapid social and generational change, widening the gap between the elites and the rest and introducing more alcohol and drugs, without appropriate education and government support.

The mix of widespread intoxication combined with the country's history of violence against women to make it a misogynist spectacle that was not a safe space for women. In 2015, the government began to threaten and enforce various restrictions on *Thingyan* aimed at addressing the widespread drug taking, alcohol-fuelled violence,²⁶ and sexual assault that occurred during the festival period. These campaigns were framed to imply that these social issues were either the result of, or at least had become worse, due to young people's involvement in the festival. While there are no quantitative studies of the distribution of violence between those on the stages versus the streets, fieldwork observations and reports suggest that violence against women ranged from the widespread groping of breasts, crotches, and bottoms that occurred in the crowds to

²⁶ Water festival was also the target of bomb attacks on 15 April 2010, for an account of the trial and police use of torture against one of the alleged culprits see: Nick Cheesman, "Reading Hobbes's Sovereign into a Burmese Narrative of Police Torture," *Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law* 17 (2016).

violent sexual assaults. Overall, such violence against women appeared to be proportionately higher on the streets than on the stages. The increased scale of *Thingyan* under the guidance of elite young people may have given rise to increased alcohol consumption, which may have contributed to sexual assaults and violence against women during the festival. However, alcohol abuse and gendered violence were not new occurrences since 2010.²⁷

Law enforcement, officials, and the government were called on to address the increased sexual activity during water festival. They responded with ill-conceived efforts that showed they were struggling with social change and increasingly out of touch with the new generation and transforming Myanmar society.²⁸ Water festival was a time of opportunity for young people looking for love for obvious reasons: partying, wet clothes, excessive alcohol, and low inhibitions. This also made it prone to increased rates of both protected and unprotected, and consensual and non-consensual sex. In response to this, in 2015 the police launched a “special project” and ordered all shops and pharmacies in Yangon remove erectile dysfunction medicine, contraceptive pills, and condoms from shelves during the festival and threatened to arrest anyone found selling them.²⁹ The removal of contraception was criticised by health professionals and foreign media, who predicted that it would lead to an increase in rates of unprotected sex, resulting in the

²⁷ A comment on a New Mandala post about an article the author wrote about *Thingyan* reminisces on this point: “I am now 62 and as far as I remember *Thingyan*’s four days (for us big boys in Rangoon City since I was a late teenage boy when I was growing up in Burma) was the period of constant drinking, groping girls and young women in the *mandats*, fighting violently with any group of boys and young men getting in our ways, and sometimes ending up in a police cell or the Emergency at dilapidated RGH (Rangoon General Hospital) or both,” James Giggacher, “Partitioned Love in the Dirty Lake,” *New Mandala*, May 2, 2014, <http://www.newmandala.org/partitioned-love-in-the-dirty-lake/>. For the original article see Jacqueline Menager, “Thingyan: Partitioned Love in the Dirty Lake,” *Thukhuma*, 2014, <http://thukhuma.org/Thingyan-2014-jacqueline-menager/>.

²⁸ Fiona Macgregor, “Time for New Thinking on Contraception,” *The Myanmar Times*, April 24, 2015, <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/opinion/14098-time-for-new-thinking-on-contraception.html>.

²⁹ Shwe Yee Saw Myint and Toe Wai Aung, “Birth Control Pulled from Shelves on Police Orders,” *The Myanmar Times*, April 10, 2015, <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/14036-birth-control-pulled-from-shelves-on-police-orders.html>.

spread of STDs, unwanted pregnancies, and dangerous illegal abortions.³⁰ The Ministry of Home Affairs, responsible for the police, and the Ministry of Health coordinated the campaign, with the Ministry of Health later saying that their initial orders were to only remove erectile dysfunction medicine from shops and that the police had misinterpreted them.³¹ In a rapidly transforming country, the government was shown to be significantly lagging through this bizarre attempt to tackle promiscuity by removing access to contraception.

In 2016, the newly elected NLD government tried a different approach and instead of a contraception ban they conducted three weeks of pre-water festival “crime prevention measures.” They reported that these measures resulted in 48 gambling cases, 99 weapons seizures, 130 tax evasions, 42 prostitution charges, 41 narcotics cases, 81 “unlawful restriction on movement” charges, and more than 1300 vehicle-related charges.³² They targeted unlicensed sex stimulants, such as erectile dysfunction medicine and creams to prolong erections, which police said could be used in rapes at the festival.³³ An additional 8000 police were deployed during the festivities. Unfortunately, a downfall of the campaign was its reliance on the discretionary power of the police to judge what medicines and supplements could lead to sexual violence. For example, a shop holder reported that the police had confiscated “aphrodisiacs” from his shop because they thought they could be used to drug women and entice them to have sex with men they would not otherwise.³⁴ The actions of 2016 were more considered than those of 2015,

³⁰ Macgregor, “Time for New Thinking on Contraception.”

³¹ Shwe Yee Saw Myint, “Health Ministry Backed Police’s Thingyan Drug Campaign,” *The Myanmar Times*, April 30, 2015, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/14198-health-ministry-backed-police-s-pre-Thingyan-drug-campaign.html>.

³² Toe Wai Aung, “Police Take Aim at Sex Drugs During Thingyan,” *The Myanmar Times*, April 4, 2016, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/yangon/19810-police-take-aim-at-sex-drugs-during-Thingyan.html>.

³³ Catherine Trautwein and Toe Win Aung, “Police Continue Thingyan Sex Drug Campaign,” *The Myanmar Times*, April 8, 2016, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/19893-police-continue-Thingyan-sex-drug-campaign.html>.

³⁴ Trautwein and Toe Wai Aung, “Police Continue Thingyan Sex Drug Campaign.”

but the continued focus on removing goods from stores that could be used by perpetrators, rather than conducting any education campaigns around women's rights, sexual education, and prevention of sexual violence indicated that the government continued to be either incapable or uninterested in addressing the underlying causes. A study of women's experiences of partner and non-partner violence in Yangon found that, on the rare occasion that women reported abuse to authorities or police, the authorities often took little or no action, and women were often at risk when they reported assaults as authorities did not keep their stories confidential or offer any protection.³⁵

In 2016, the police campaigns also included threats to arrest young women who wore "revealing" clothing. A senior police officer in Mandalay explained, "it's important that women dress modestly and behave sensibly for their own safety," and warned that young women who wore revealing clothing could be arrested under Section 294 of the Penal Code, which prohibited "obscene" acts.³⁶ The police threatened that they would imprison young women for up to four months for "wearing clothing beyond the limits of Burmese culture that can be an eyesore to the public who cherish and would like to uphold the Burmese culture."³⁷ The move to sanction young women's clothing choices, rather than enact any measures to address the prevalence of groping and sexual assault that many reported during water festival was criticised as victim blaming.³⁸ Myanmar suffered from entrenched failures to protect women from abuse, including domestic violence, said to

³⁵ *Behind the Silence: Violence Against Women and their Resilience* (Yangon, Myanmar: The Gender Quality Network, February 2015), 4.

³⁶ Mandalay District Police commander lieutenant colonel Sein Tun, Charlotte England, "Myanmar's Water Festival is an Alcohol-Fueled, Misogynistic Mess," *Vice Broadly*, April 29, 2016, https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/z4jp83/myanmars-water-festival-is-an-alcohol-fueled-misogynistic-mess.

³⁷ "Watch What You Wear, Authorities Tell Women Ahead of Thingyan" *DVB*, March 30, 2016, <http://www.dvb.no/news/watch-what-you-wear-authorities-tell-women-ahead-of-Thingyan/61449>.

³⁸ Fiona Macgregor, "Groping: The Real Thingyan Crime," *The Myanmar Times*, April 8, 2016, <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/opinion/19908-groping-the-real-Thingyan-crime.html>.

be a result of the country's "deeply conservative and patriarchal culture."³⁹ While the sentiment behind these campaigns and the execution by police may have had the best of intentions, in practice they were grossly inadequate and violated young women's rights, a concerning continuance of military-era governance into now civilian governed Myanmar. The campaigns aimed at and the police statements about young women's clothing and behaviour were decried as "victim blaming" and "reinforcing rape culture."⁴⁰

During *Thingyan*, a large majority of the country's men appeared to be intoxicated, which heightened the country's history of violence against women and rendered the festival a profoundly unsafe space for women. Violence against women is a persistent social problem in Myanmar, and the state has repeatedly proven unable or unwilling to address it.⁴¹ A 2015 study by the Gender Equality Network in Yangon provides significant quantitative and qualitative evidence of pervasive and widespread violence against women – including that groping in public spaces was "considered a normal part of women's experiences moving around town," and that almost half the women surveyed had experienced some form of non-partner rape, sexual assault, or sexual harassment.⁴² As the government refined their policies regarding what kinds of behaviours and morals they supported, it became apparent that certain features of the new generation, including young women in short skirts and young men on drugs, would not be tolerated.

³⁹ Ei Cherry Aung, "Burma's Laws and Traditions Failing Abused Women," *DVB*, August 5, 2016, <http://www.dvb.no/news/burma-laws-traditions-failing-abused-women/69100>; Ei Cherry Aung, "Rape Victims Struggle to Find Justice," *DVB*, February 12, 2016, <http://www.dvb.no/news/rape-victims-struggle-to-find-justice/60696>.

⁴⁰ Pyo Let Han quoted in England, "Myanmar's Water Festival is an Alcohol-Fueled, Misogynistic Mess."

⁴¹ "The threat of possible violence, particularly sexualized violence and rape, underpins the conformity to these norms of behaviour. Women who do not conform to normative dress and behaviour patterns may be blamed for not paying sufficient attention to these threats if they encounter abuse, therefore reinforcing a culture of victim-blaming," see *Raising the Curtain: Cultural Norms, Social Practices and Gender Equality in Myanmar* (Yangon, Myanmar: The Gender Equality Network, November 2015), 32.

⁴² *Behind the Silence* (The Gender Quality Network), 4.

Conclusion

Festivals are sites of collective social expression and production. The way the elite new generation of Myanmar appropriated *Thingyan* from 2013 to 2015 indicated their broader engagement with Myanmar society. By discussing *Thingyan* as a site of social expression and production, this Chapter presents the five social groups of the new generation of elite young people in Myanmar during this period of generational change. In addition to considering the new generation's appropriation of the space that *Thingyan* opened for celebration and performance, the festival displays how they, as a new generation, were perceived by the Myanmar government and the wider population. The government's campaigns against certain antisocial and violent aspects of the festival – sexual assault and gendered violence – were undertaken under cover of disparaging the corrupting influence of foreign styles and values on Myanmar culture.

From 2013 to 2015, young people capitalised on the Myanmar population's tolerance for the festival to create a spectacle of generational change, displaying and performing new identities and freedoms in daylight in front of the government, other new generation members, and the wider population. While the festival was symbolically a time when the Myanmar population was free to celebrate as one, irrespective of social status, in reality, it was a highly stratified affair that revealed enduring social hierarchies and the influence of elite qualities. In one particular aspect, the different experiences of elite and non-elite women, the uneven progress of women's freedoms according to social status was revealed. Elite young women were free to celebrate and have fun protected by security guards and barricades on stages, while non-elite women faced endemic sexual assault and violence if they tried to celebrate the festival. The government's response to sexual assault and increased rates of sex during the festival conflated both sexual assault with consensual sex, and sexual assault with foreign influences and the new generation.

Thingyan festival displayed the sense of excitement and the freedom of identity production and performance that elite young people expressed during this period. A closer inspection of *Thingyan* and the new generation allows a more nuanced appreciation for the social, cultural, political, and economic changes they heralded. Generational change was not a homogenising process and it did not result in one single identity, behaviour, moral attitude, or *Thingyan* stages. Instead, multiple identities and experiences arose and negotiated their status in Myanmar's social location from 2010 to 2016, as represented by the different stages during *Thingyan*. The competition and incompatibility of the different identities is apparent from the profusion of different stages at *Thingyan*. The festival was a spectacle of generational change, representing the excited and hopeful sentiments of the new generation during this period, but also the resistance of some in the government and population to the new generation.

Since 2010, the new generation capitalised on the weakened cultural fortitude of the festival, appropriating the social void it left – the four days of public holidays and the city shut down – for their own ends. The traditional and cultural basis of *Thingyan* as a Buddhist lunar New Year's Eve festival and space for all the population to celebrate irrespective of social status had been under threat for decades. The festival had been the subject of decades of co-optation by the military state for displays of nationalist glory. Whatever the reasons, the call for a return to the old days or claims that young people were destroying the traditional values of the festival overly-simplifies a long and complex process of cultural change in Myanmar.⁴³ Alcoholism⁴⁴ and violence against women⁴⁵ are longstanding social issues in Myanmar, which did not arise or coincide with the 2010 transformation. The attention that these issues receive has increased since 2010, and the

⁴³ Farrelly, "Misplaced Affection for the Old Days."

⁴⁴ Hulst, "The Alcohol Curse."

⁴⁵ *Behind the Silence* (The Gender Quality Network).

government's naïve policy solutions can be seen as a result of their higher profile and the government's own progress in trying to address social issues.⁴⁶

The appropriation of *Thingyan* by the new generation invites some inferences about the influence of the new generation on Myanmar society and culture during this period. Young people's ability to control and influence how the festival was celebrated indicated their increasing agency in shaping Myanmar society. The different experiences of *Thingyan* between different types of elite young people, and between elite and non-elite people, reveal broader social hierarchies and different ideas of leisure and fun. While generational change is a long process occurring at multiple sites, festivals represent a time when a society can display the state of their progress for all to see. Where the new generation resisted, negotiated, created, and reinvented Myanmar social change year-round in elite spaces, behind closed doors of nightclubs and bars, during *Thingyan* they were able to display themselves on stages in full view of the wider population, the media, each other, and the government. The new generation took advantage of this freedom and from 2013 to 2015 they used the festival space to stage their identities and to celebrate their progress.

⁴⁶ Another government campaign against alcohol, involved raids on illegal imports of alcohol and raising liquor license fees. However, issues in the execution meant that there were months when imported alcohol and cigarettes were simply unavailable, see Aye Thidar Kyaw, "Shelves Run Dry as Alcohol Pulled," *The Myanmar Times*, February 27, 2015, <https://www.mmtimes.com/business/13270-shelves-run-dry-as-retailers-pull-imported-alcohol.html>.

Conclusion

In Myanmar in 2010, the military junta undertook a managed transition of power away from overt military rule through an electoral process.¹ The social and economic changes that flowed from that transition resulted in a sudden influx and appropriation of global flows of people, information, styles, and products.² Answering the research question – what was the role of elite young people in mediating social and economic change into elite composition and practice in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016? – this thesis has established that elite young people played various roles in what was ultimately an uneven and ongoing process of generational change. Elite young people wrought changes that were both small and large, from the integration of new technologies into existing relationship strategies of control, to the rise of the underground rappers as key cultural actors in popular music.

The process of generational change was uneven, with the threshold groups – the Yakuza gangsters, the cronies, and the beloved young women – continuing certain legacies of the military junta, while the outliers – the underground rappers and the creative imaginants – sought to revolutionise the country's cultural horizons. In the early years of Myanmar's transformation, elite young people reevaluated what were elite qualities and thereby who were elite people. Elite young people mediated some changes to moral standards, leading to increased opportunities for young women and the increased profile of openly gay

¹ Holliday, *Burma Redux*, 1.

² Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*; Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*.

men. Despite these changes, some pervasive social issues, including violence and gender inequalities, persisted.

This thesis makes an original contribution to theory by combining a generational approach with an elite-focused framework, opening a field of research into the role of elite young people in social and economic change. Myanmar is an important case study highlighting the tensions between generational change and the persistence of certain inherited elite qualities through moments of sudden, marked, and significant changes.³ For elite theory, the scale of social and economic changes challenges the intransigence of inherited elite qualities.⁴ For generational theory, the durability of certain elite qualities despite the widespread social transformation points to a degree of continuity between generations. Overall, an analysis of how elite young people mediated social and economic changes into elite practice and composition in Myanmar points to the tension between change and continuity.

Finding Myanmar's elite new generation

Extended fieldwork conducted in Yangon from 2012 to 2015, found evidence that elite young people were influential cultural actors mediating rapid domestic social changes. These same young people were simultaneously engaged in a complex process of reintegrating Myanmar into global flows of information and people. By focusing on elite young people, this thesis showed that the elite qualities of a society emerge as a result of young people working to make them elite. Elite qualities are inherited and made increasingly durable as they are passed down from generation to generation, as elite theory argues, but they are also challenged and overturned by new qualities during

³ Rapid political change following significant political unrest in Egypt, Baghdad, and elsewhere in the Middle East, as well as possible transitions from dictatorships in countries such as North Korea and Iran, could lead to similar experiences of generational change and shifting elite qualities.

⁴ Etzioni-Halvey, "Elites, Inequality and the Quality of Democracy."

periods of rapid social and economic change that gives rise to generational transformation. Appraising elite young Myanmar people in a moment of social transformation rendered their influence particularly visible.

These elite young people were from a diverse range of backgrounds and various classes. Rather than occupying these influential positions as a result of primarily financial capital or inherited social status, the case of Myanmar's elite young people indicated the merits of pursuing an elite-based approach, rather than a class-based approach. Theories of elite tend to displace class-based social divisions, instead considering the elite as those who are in positions of influence or have decision making power, whether real or potential.⁵ Elite young people operate in shared spaces, seeing each other socially and for business, and often making decisions attentive to other elite people's interests. Elite young people in Myanmar were identifiable by the informed observer – their style of dress, consumption habits, demeanour, outlooks, and morals were discernibly different from their countrymen. C. Wright Mills described the interconnectedness of the American elite as where “no matter what else they may be, the people of these higher circles are involved in a set of overlapping ‘crowds’ and intricately connected ‘cliques.’”⁶ This description of crowds or cliques resonates with the social groups analysed in this thesis, separated as they were into different social groups and yet overlapping and interconnected in the shared social space that was the world of the elite young people in Yangon.

Categorising individuals into social groups according to certain qualities and structuring the thesis according to their relationship to existing social structures, provides an analytical tool for future research. A typology of the five social groups of elite young

⁵ John Higley, “Elite Theory and Elites,” in *Handbook of Politics: State and Society in Global Perspective*, eds. Kevin Leicht and J. Craig Jenkins (Springer: New York, 2010).

⁶ Mills, *The Power Elite*.

people in Myanmar from 2010 to 2016 was created, as a result of immersive, qualitative research in the country's urban capital, Yangon. The five social groups were organised according to their relationship to change, creating a continuum from those most resistant to change to the revolutionary outliers. The Yakuza gangsters, analysed in Chapter 2, were the most resistant to change. The gangsters were a threshold group into the new generation, representative of legacy capital and the country's military history. The gangsters violently resisted changes that threatened their hitherto unrivalled dominance over the nightscape of Yangon. Similar to the gangsters, the cronies also inherited their privilege and were analysed in Chapter 3 as the second threshold group of the new generation. In contrast to the gangsters, the cronies made a more significant effort to progressively transition as Myanmar changed, by moving from military-reliant cronies to increasingly independent young oligarchs. The oligarchs were members of global networks of elite young people, as portrayed on social media. The gangsters and the cronies inherited their legacies and worked in different ways to propagate their legacies and status into the new generation.

Moving along the spectrum of change, Chapter 4 analysed elite young women. Despite widespread changes during this period, elite young women remained structurally disadvantaged below men and restricted by reputational concerns centring on their virginity and marriage. Some elite young women changed their lives by taking up new opportunities to study at overseas universities and establish careers for themselves in the burgeoning local employment market. Overall, the experience of young women revealed that generational change was an unequal process, and many social issues persisted in 2016.

Chapter 5 analysed the first group of outliers of the new generation, the underground rappers. This point in the thesis represented a shift from the threshold groups into the

more revolutionary groups of the new generation. The outliers heralded more revolutionary changes to the country's elite composition and practice. The underground rappers had spent decades struggling under military rule and harsh state censorship. After 2012, when the country was reintegrated into international music trends and censorship was lifted, these underground rappers rose to popularity and hip-hop became a popular music style in Myanmar. While the rappers enjoyed a period of unparalleled popularity, their thrust into official realms also exposed them to scrutiny by the wider population and they faced significant judgement and intolerance. By 2016, their ascension to elite status indicated changes to the country's elite composition and hip-hop music's popularity represented a change to the country's cultural practices. The second social group of outliers were the creatives, analysed in Chapter 6, who also aimed to revolutionise the culture of Myanmar. Driven to change Yangon in order to accommodate their lifestyles and sensibilities, many of the creatives were able to use their parents' fortunes to overhaul the existing art, hospitality, fashion, and music scenes. By 2016, the creatives had built new urban art spaces, imported accessible foreign fashions, effectively mediating changes to Myanmar's practices that reintegrated the country into global flows of culture and fashion. The creatives also changed the country's elite composition by raising the profile of openly gay men and challenging the heteronormativity of the popular music scene.

Drawing the five social groups together in a site of commonality and interaction, Chapter 7 analysed the spectacle of *Thingyan*. The new ways that the new generation of elite young people performed during *Thingyan* reflected wider changes that were occurring to elite practice and composition during this period. New identities were represented in the diversity of stage types, new practices were visible in the ways elite young people consumed intoxicants and flirted with one another on stages, and new elite composition

was represented by the high profile of the country's underground rappers as performers and VIP special guests on many stages. Other aspects of the festival, including the continued stratification between elite people on stages and non-elite people in the streets below, and the continued prevalence of violence against women, indicated persistent social issues that continued despite generational change.

Myanmar's new generation did not arise in a moment as a coherent generation. Instead, the new generation developed through a process of reevaluating existing ways of doing things, developing new meanings and explanations, and negotiating the foreign into the local. Elite young people were cultural actors who variously resisted, negotiated, and overhauled the elite qualities and established systems of Myanmar. This thesis disaggregated Myanmar's elite young people during a period of rapid social change, establishing that they were important and interesting, and advanced understandings of the complex processes present in such moments of rapid social change. By doing so, it provided evidence of how elite young people can reevaluate and alter existing systems in order to accommodate new lifestyles, identities, attitudes, and morals.

Continuing legacies and changing lifestyles

By 2016, Myanmar was an irrevocably different country to that of 2010. During this period, some elite young people advanced their elite qualities through a variety of displays and behaviours, including particular consumption patterns, cultures, and styles. Other elite young people resisted changes and defended the country's legacies and existing political culture, including gender hierarchies and legacies of fear, through violent reminders of the country's history and the continued domination of young women. The way the tension between continuity and change of elite composition and practice played out in Myanmar indicated that elite young people were cultural actors who leveraged

their elite status and influenced the process of social and economic change. The organisation of the thesis according to the social group's attitudes to change is also indicative of whether the groups inherited legacies of privilege or worked to promote new elite qualities. The elite qualities of the gangsters, the cronies, and the young women were inherited advantages, while the underground rappers and the creative imaginants introduced new identities and elite qualities.

Untangling and making cognisant the legacies of decades of military rule provides greater detail of the process of social and economic change in this moment of Myanmar's history. The gangsters were most active in reinforcing the gender roles and violently defending their historical domination of the country, which were remnants of past decades. Other social groups more subtly supported the continuance of the political economy formed under the military junta, including when young women embraced their curfews and chaperones in order to maintain their reputations. Sometimes, it was the unassailable effects of decades of economic mismanagement and lack of infrastructure that curtailed members of the new generation's ambitious ideas, such as when Steven Oo was unable to build his fashion empire due to poor infrastructure and international shipping connections.

Some of the legacies and institutions of military rule endured, but their dominance was ultimately undermined by the rise of new elite qualities and practices. Contributing to the decline of the legacies of military rule and the diminishment of the gangsters' rule over the country was the entrance of new global cultural flows of information, people, products, and media. The cronies drove around Yangon in exclusive European sports cars and spent significant time abroad vacationing and studying. Elite young women started wearing short skirts and baring their midriffs and expressing their dissatisfaction with the double standard between men and women that existed. Underground rappers

and foreign music acts played new styles of music at new bars and clubs. Young lovers tattooed Romanised versions of their names on each other and Skyped through the night to prove their devotion to one another. Smartphones and the Internet became an innocuous and essential part of life and relationships for most young people. As such, during this period, the new generation revaluated and mediated changes into elite practice, embracing foreign styles and increasingly bringing Myanmar into line with international patterns of globalisation.

Further evidence pointed to a generational shift underway, including support for the new elite quality of cultural capital, as promoted by the creatives and the underground rappers. The underground rappers and the creatives were both outlier groups but in very different ways. The underground rappers of Chapter 5 became elite as the result of new cultural capital. The cultural capital that granted them elite status was not recognised by the wider population as an elite quality prior to 2010, and thereby these young men were not elite people. Prior to 2010, the underground rappers catered to a niche cultural scene and were not officially recognised or allowed to produce publicly. After 2010, the underground rappers gradually experienced more popularity from their fame and notoriety. In 2012, the end of state censorship aided these fledgling members of the elite scene of Yangon, and by 2014 they dominated social events including the stages of *Thingyan*.

Taking a similar trajectory, also assisted by certain state policy changes, the creative imaginants analysed in Chapter 6 welcomed the end of military rule. The creatives, unlike the underground artists, came from wealthy families but had spent their time overseas or remained insulated from military rule. Like the underground artists, the creatives benefitted from a change of government policy. For the creatives, it was the passage of a new Foreign Investment Law in 2012 that signalled a degree of connectivity with the

global world was imminent and that the government was increasingly open to alternative businesses. The creatives had previously remained detached from Myanmar society, unwelcome and unable to fulfil their creative impulses. Recognising the beginnings of social and economic changes, the creatives reengaged with their country, working to change the landscape of Myanmar to accommodate them, and others like them.

Together, the five social groups of the new generation represented the elite qualities that were present during these early years of Myanmar's transformation. The rise of new elite qualities indicated that the social characteristics of Myanmar society more broadly were shifting to increasingly value creativity, authenticity, and alternative identities. The continuance, albeit diminished, of existing elite qualities pointed to the durability of the legacies of military rule including violence, mistrust, and gender inequality. The continuity and change of elite qualities through the new generation of elite young people has been detailed in order to advance understanding of the complex processes present in moments of rapid social and economic change. The process of generational change has been shown to include the rejuvenation of some existing and the origination of some new elite qualities.

Violence, virgins, and the virtual world

The tension between continuity and change was also visible in the ways elite young people negotiated existing gender structures against new opportunities for young women and identities for young men. By 2016, changes to gender structures and masculinity were visible and signified that the long process of undoing aspects of Myanmar's political culture was underway. These indicators included the gangsters' recourse to violence, which showed their dominance of the nightscape was under threat by new groups of young men. Another indicator was the continued importance of virginity, through which

the population indicated a need to maintain moral standards for young women in the face of liberalising morals and foreign attitudes regarding gender roles. A final indicator was the incorporation of new technologies of the virtual world into existing social dynamics for socialising, conducting relationships, facilitating infidelities, and advertising identities. The ways the new generation used violence, virginity, and the virtual world demonstrated the continued influence of Myanmar's political culture. Myanmar's political culture had been crafted through decades of military rule to include institutions that fostered mistrust, an atmosphere of scrutiny, and pervasive Buddhist beliefs that justified gender hierarchies.⁷ As has been shown in this thesis, these features of military rule did not evaporate in 2010 but were unavoidably engaged with by the new generation.

Myanmar has a long history of violence, which continued to animate certain interactions after 2010. The gangsters most explicitly reminded the population of that history, and of their assumed control of that legacy of violent dominance. When in the nightscape of Yangon, the gangsters would exude a powerful and violent masculinity in their interactions that prioritised themselves above all others, including other young men, young women, staff, and law enforcement. If other young men ever challenged the gangsters' masculinity, through real or perceived threats to their dominance, they would respond violently. It followed that as more young men participated in and threatened the gangsters' dominance of the nightscape, so the gangsters responded with erratic and unpredictable violent outbursts. By 2016 the newer participants in the nightscape appeared to simply avoid the gangsters and thereby circumvent the violence – in much the way that the population under military rule avoided confrontation with the state, or the underground rappers avoided potential instances of state sanction.

⁷ Egrettau, "Myanmar: Transition, Praetorian Politics"; Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*; Walton, "Buddhism, Politics, and Political Change."

Elsewhere, violence against women during *Thingyan* suggests the Myanmar population had not forgotten that history of violence and that underlying social issues remained. Continued violence against women serves as a potent reminder that generational change and social transformation is not a panacea for all of a society's problems, but rather is a complex process through which many antisocial practices can persist unless effective interventions, from the government and population, occur. The plight of Myanmar's women and the scapegoating of the country's Muslim population are distressing reminders of this.

While the new generation did not absolve Myanmar of all its lingering social issues, it did contribute to the increasing independence of the business community from the military. Part of this independence was expressed through a move towards more refined and foreign masculine identities, such as the debonair entrepreneurs opening niche venues and propagating their version of elite distinction on social media. The cronies transition to oligarchs, and ability to negotiate their way to independence from military patronage, stood in stark contrast to the violent resistance of the gangsters. By 2016 the comparative advantage of the cronies was on the rise, while the gangsters increasingly skulked into their dark, violent, memory-laden nightscape. The cronies relied on the aggressive accumulation of financial capital and business networks, rather than the physical violent domination of the country. By 2016 it remained unclear if the aggressive consolidation of the cronies' power and control would include instances of philanthropy and development assistance, or if it would lead to ever-widening social inequality.

Another change to the sexual relations of Myanmar was the increasing profile of openly gay young men. The increasing visibility of these young men and their elite status indicated the dominant heteronormativity of Myanmar society was shifting. As elite young men, these openly gay men were protected from much of the discrimination and

persecution faced by their non-elite contemporaries. From their elite vantage point, elite gay men were able to raise alternative forms of masculinity onto the public stage, including into popular culture. Beyond the shift represented by their very existence and profile though, their appeal to a large enough segment of the population to become a popular musician or a fashion designer suggests support and identification outside of the elite groups. This supports the idea that a society's characteristics are reflected in its elite qualities.⁸ It follows that by 2016, Myanmar society appeared to have reevaluated the violent masculinity and heteronormativity as key social characteristics.

Researching the diffusion of and identification with these elite qualities in the wider Myanmar population was beyond the scope of this project. However, some initial observations from popular culture and social media support the hypothesis that Myanmar's social characteristics appeared to be broadly reflecting these new elite qualities. The popularity of Ar-T as an openly gay artist and the idolisation of the cronies' depictions of their global lifestyles suggested that the population may have been more accommodating of sexual orientation and of foreign systems. Whether this acceptance and idolisation was the result of the new freedom to express it, without the ominous threat of military retaliation; from the influence of new global flows of information and peoples; indicative of some changed nature of Myanmar society; or an interaction of all these factors is deserving of further attention.

The reintegration of Myanmar into global flows of information and people included new technologies. Elite young people embraced new technologies in Yangon, and smartphones and the Internet quickly became integral elements to their friendships, relationships, identity formation, and virtually all aspects of their lives. These technologies provided a window into other elite young people's lives and access to

⁸ Etzioni-Halvey, "Elites, Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in Ultramodern Society."

foreign trends. Adding to the awareness of these foreign trends and styles was the increasing access to international travel that came with increased commercial flight networks and affordability, and the ability to obtain a passport. These flights went both ways of course, and as Myanmar people went overseas to experience other cultures, so too foreigners visited Myanmar in increasing numbers. The new Foreign Investment Law and the end of international sanctions increased business opportunities and revitalised the employment market in Yangon. Together, these flows of information and people reintegrated Myanmar into the complex web of interaction that is globalisation. Elite young people mediated these interactions into Myanmar culture and practice. Styles, lifestyles, spaces, mindsets, relationships, and identities reflected these social and economic changes.

Future research

The benefits of taking an elite approach to make sense of elite composition and practice have been shown through the case of Myanmar. An elite approach identifies the impact of forms of capital beyond only financial capital, and future researchers may usefully apply this elite approach to the study of other individuals and social groups in Myanmar and elsewhere. Combining the elite approach with a social generational approach has particular merits when considering the role of elite young people in mediating social and economic changes in moments of transformation. Future studies could usefully consider the role of young people and identify generational changes in relation to various social practices, including, for example, expressions of religious belief and practice, the nature of patronage networks, and the mediation of ethnic identities.

This thesis reconciles classical theories of the Western world into a study of a contemporary Asian country. A generational approach from an elite vantage is applied to

an Asian country – away from the America of Mills, the Australia of Wyn and Woodman, and the England of Riley, Morey, and Griffin’s studies.⁹ The significance of the Asian region and the importance of elite Asian individuals and family dynasties in the global political order justifies research into privilege, capital, and elitism in the region. This thesis has contributed a recognition of the influence of the new generation elite young Myanmar people to the various studies of privilege, capital, and elitism in the Asian region – such as those of Japan¹⁰ and China.¹¹ An elite approach is useful when researching in the Asian region, rather than class-based theories framed according to European classical theories of aristocratic dynasties, taste distinction, and bourgeoisie inheritances that have little relevance in the Asian region.¹²

Elite studies promote a more circumstantial consideration of a specific society to identify its elite values and qualities, and then to establish that society’s hierarchy of elite values, rather than taking a pre-established framework of financial capital and inherited legacies of status and fitting different societies into that framework. This circumstantial consideration is particularly useful when considering moments of rapid social change and instability, including elite political transitions that lead to massive revaluations of existing systems such as occurred in Myanmar. In these moments, it is not possible to point to some finite state of elite composition or practice and researchers are encouraged to instead draw out tensions between continuity and change in what is a complex process that is unique to that society and moment in time.

⁹ Michael Wesley, “Introduction to Research in Asia-Pacific Affairs,” in *Muddy Boots & Smart Suits: Researching Asia-Pacific Affairs*, eds. Nicholas Farrelly et al (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2017).

¹⁰ Allison, *Nightwork*.

¹¹ Osburg, *Anxious Wealth*.

¹² Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

This thesis was supported by immersive, qualitative insights from unprecedented access to elite young people in Myanmar's urban centre. Future research may compliment and challenge its arguments to ultimately create a fuller understanding of Myanmar's transformation. However, due to the speed at which Myanmar is transforming, it is likely that this study will be the only one to describe the role of elite young people in this moment of Myanmar's history. Others will consider these young people later in their lives, when they are important and influential figures, but this study will remain a touchstone for understanding how and why they came to be in those roles.

Yangon regenerated

Until 2010, Myanmar was a pariah state and Yangon was a crowded, dirty city. By 2016, Myanmar was hailed as a democratic success story and Yangon was a crowded, dirty, global city. The crumbling facades of old colonial buildings were undergoing restoration, and their interiors were transformed into contemporary spaces that served updated versions of traditional Myanmar food and drink. In the midst of a bustling port, a corrugated iron shed door could be rolled back to reveal a shiny white interior replete with contemporary art and designer accoutrement. On the streets, cheap new imported sedans honked alongside expensive new imported sports cars in the congestion caused by the construction of multiple monolithic flyovers at large intersections across the city.

Different groups of elite young people contributed in different ways to the hybridised version of Yangon that emerged from this period. The threshold groups variously continued, transitioned, and adapted existing systems in response to the influx of new identities, business opportunities, and technologies that flowed after 2010. The outliers pushed the boundaries and worked to expand the space for new cultures and identities that had been created during this period. Together, they interpreted a moment of rapid

social change and worked out new ways to exist and flourish as a new generation.

Through this complex process of resistance, negotiation, and change a new generation of Myanmar's elite young people emerged with ambitions to lead the country in the decades to come. As the battle for political power in Naypyidaw revealed the country's ageing politicians as ineffective and out of touch, Myanmar's elite young people increasingly took control of the country's social and economic regeneration in the urban capital of Yangon.

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